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CHRISTMAS
AT
SUNBERRY
DALE

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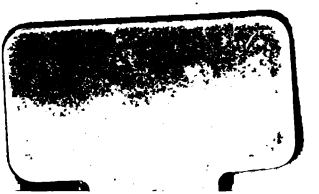

"Before Mr. Melville could look round, two or three snowballs were thrown at him."—*Page* 67.

CHRISTMAS

STARRYTOP HALL.

By

W. B. E.,

AUTHOR OF 'CALDERTOP TOWER,' 'SCOTSTOUN,' 'THE WISHING CHAIR,' 'CLARA DOWNIE OF DRUMMUIR,' ETC.

LONDON:
JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.
1870.

CHRISTMAS

AT

SUNBERRY DALE:

A Story for the Young.

BY

W. B. B.,

AUTHOR OF "FAITHFUL TO JESUS," "JOE SINGLETON'S WISHING TREE," "CLARA DOWNING'S DREAM," ETC.

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CHRISTMAS AT SUNBERRY DALE.

CHAPTER I.

SUNBERRY DALE.

SUNBERRY DALE is the name of a country house and grounds in one of the most beautiful of the western counties of England. I have seen many of the most lovely spots in our country, but none fairer nor richer than this.

Sunberry Dale is about a mile from the quaint old town of Chesterton, and the house, standing in a dell and well surrounded by trees, is not seen until you come almost upon it. I do not know whether I can describe the house to you, but I will try. It is a long old-fashioned house of three stories, each window of the third story being set in

a high pointed gable. A rustic gabled porch stands out from the centre of the house, and over this porch and around the lower windows of the house the white clematis and the sweet honeysuckle twine and twist their branches until the windows themselves and the roof of the porch are almost hidden. Above these, and reaching nearly to the points of the gables, are trained some of the finest pear-trees I ever saw. A large oval lawn spreads itself before the house, having for its central ornament an antique stone sun-dial, now almost hidden by luxuriant lichens. The carriage drive passes round the lawn and skirts a deep fossé, which divides the lawn from a well-stocked orchard; beyond which stand the fine old woods of Leyoak Park. The house is approached from the town of Chesterton by a wide well kept gravelled road, bordered for a long distance by greensward and neatly trimmed hedges; whilst on the one side the clear waters of a little brook are hasting with many an eddying ripple on their way to join a distant river. As you draw near to the house the drive passes through a fine avenue

of lime-trees, through whose branches you catch many a glimpse of the stately Norman tower of Chesterton Church, and of the slopes of the not distant Woldcot hills.

I have seen Sunberry Dale at all seasons of the year; when the limes were without a single leaf, and the cold wind whistled through their bare branches and danced round the house, making the old gables shake, and then shrieking and howling in its roomy chimneys. I have seen it, too, when the limes began to put on their summer dress, and the warm sunshine made the birds that flittered amongst their branches sing their sweetest songs; when the old garden grew gay with bright coloured flowers, and the old house grew young again in its robes of clematis and woodbine. I have seen it, too, when the trees wore their robes of autumn brown, and when almost every puff of wind caused some of them to fall shivering to the ground, and they piled themselves up in brown heaps beneath the branches where all the summer long they had danced and laughed in the sunshine. Many a time I have walked amongst them and enjoyed the rustling noise

as I scattered them about. That was long years ago, for they tell me I am getting old and grey-headed now; but I shall never forget the bright, happy boyish days spent at Sunberry Dale.

I could tell you many stories about this place, for there is hardly a tree I do not know, nor a corner which I have not explored; whilst with many of those who have lived at the dear old house I have been intimately acquainted. Some of them were old and grey-headed when first I knew the house, and they have been sleeping beneath the great elm trees in Chesterton church-yard for many long years; and those who were merry boys and girls when I was a lad are now as old and grey-haired as I am; and another race of boys and girls are sporting as merrily in the old orchard and garden as we did years ago.

Sunberry Dale has long been the residence of the Melvilles. The Mr. Melville of this story was a tall, fine man, with a face beaming with kindness, and who was always spoken of as a good and generous man. I wish I could describe Mrs. Melville to you.

Nobody thought of calling her handsome, yet she had one of the sweetest, kindest faces I ever saw. She was quite a little woman, with quiet gentle ways, and who seemed always to be thinking about the comfort and happiness of those around, and never thinking of herself. If you could only see her in her dark dress (for she always wore dark dresses), and with her white hair smoothly banded beneath her white lace cap, moving about the passages and rooms of the old house you would like her as much as I do. Everybody loved Mrs. Melville. The servants often said they would do anything for her, and all the little children of the families she visited knew no greater treat than a visit to Sunberry Dale. Even the dogs, and the fowls that stalked about the premises, seemed to know her step, and to look brighter at the sound of her voice; whilst the old tabby cat never seemed so happy as when coiled up on the skirt of her dress as she sat at work, or trotting after her as she moved about in the garden or on the lawn.

Mr. and Mrs. Melville had three children, and at the time about which this story speaks

they were all young. Mark, the eldest, was about sixteen, a tall, thin, delicate looking boy, with his mother's kind face and gentle, quiet ways. Edith was about two years younger than Mark; she had her mother's small and graceful form, but possessed the merry, boisterous spirit of her father. Charlie, the youngest, was hardly twelve; a strong active lad, with a face that seemed all smiles and mischief. Hardly a tree in the grounds which he had not climbed, and he had fallen into all the ponds and streams in the neighbourhood, generally coming home wet through or with his clothes torn and ragged. He could imitate the sounds made by all the birds and beasts which were found in the surrounding grounds; and made so much noise and confusion in the house generally that the servants said, "they should be glad when he went away to school." Yet everybody liked him. His frank, happy face was like sunshine in the corners of the old house; and though he vexed his mother by sliding down stairs on the hand-rail, or tormenting the servants in the kitchen, yet he loved her as much as any of them, and would as tenderly care for her

wants. He was as open and honest as he could be, and hated and exposed everything like meanness and wrong. Though the brothers were so different one from the other, they agreed most happily; whilst they both strove to help and please their only sister.

Mr. Melville was steward to the owner of Leyoak Park, and was therefore much away from home; but he entered heartily into his children's pleasures when amongst them, and sometimes when a day could be spared by him from other engagements, he would, if the day were fine, spend it with his children in roaming about the woods, which stretched away for miles beyond their home. Those were happy days to the children, and no greater pleasure could you promise them than a day in the woods with papa. They came home tired enough in the evenings, but always laden with wild flowers or fruit for mamma, and ready to recount to her all the little incidents and pleasures of the day.

All seasons seemed pleasant at Sunberry Dale, but for some things Christmas time seemed the pleasantest of all. The house was often filled with guests, and the long

corridors echoed all day long with shouts of joy and merry laughter.

This story is about a merry Christmas time spent at Sunberry Dale some years ago; and the memory of it is a very pleasant thing to those who were guests there on that occasion.

It wanted nearly a week to Christmas, and the weather was bitterly cold. People said it would be a real old-fashioned Christmas with sharp frosts and plenty of snow. The family at the Dale had just finished breakfast when the servant brought the letters into the breakfast room, and placed them by Mr. Melville. Charlie was busy sorting them before his papa could put on his spectacles. He had hardly done so when a loud "hurra" broke from Charlie's lips, and he ran across the room to his mamma, upsetting two chairs and a stool in his progress. "Charlie, Charlie, why cannot you walk across the room properly? Look at those chairs."

"Never mind the chairs, mamma, dear, now. It's Christmas time. See, here's a letter from Uncle Hadfield. I wonder whether he'll let cousins come!

Mrs. Melville took the letter and read it. It was from her only brother, a widowed clergyman in the south of England, saying that he should be pleased to let his children spend Christmas with them at Sunberry Dale, but it was very doubtful whether he himself could come.

"Bravo," shouted Charlie, "I say that's jolly, papa. Won't we have a merry time of it? When are they coming, mamma?"

"On the twenty-second—three days before Christmas day," replied Mrs. Melville.

CHAPTER II.

VISITORS.

THE children at the Dale were full of excitement as the days passed away, and the day drew near on which their cousins were to arrive. They had spent many hours together in making plans for the amusement and entertainment of their visitors, all of them entering into the pleasure most heartily; whilst the time flew away very rapidly to them all, for they were all busy.

Christmas day fell on the Saturday, that year, so that Wednesday was the twenty-second of December, the day when the Hadfields were expected to come. On the Wednesday morning, the children at the Dale were up much earlier than usual, although their cousins were not expected to arrive until late in the afternoon. There had been much anxiety about the weather

on the Tuesday night, for the clouds were driving heavily over the sky, and several spots of rain had fallen in the early part of the afternoon; but no settled rain had fallen before they retired to bed. The last words spoken by the children that night were about the weather, all of them hoping it would be fine for their cousins, or their journey would be so long and comfortless.

The room in which Charlie and Mark slept was immediately over the entrance hall, and the window opened on to the quaint porch which concealed the front door. Before it was light the next morning, Charlie was awake and trying to see what kind of weather it was; he could not see, but he heard ominous little pats of rain-drops on the roof of the porch. "Ah," said he to himself, "it's always the way with the weather; when one wants it to be fine, it's certain to be wet; and if one wants it to rain, it's always dry." And he crept back to bed feeling very disappointed, without even waking Mark who was still fast asleep.

The fire was burning brightly, and the table spread for breakfast, when Mr. Melville

entered the breakfast-room. The children were all standing against the window, and looking out on the wet lawn with faces almost as cheerless as the weather. The window was so covered with raindrops that it was difficult to see through it, but where you could see out, the shrubs seemed to hang their heads wearily as the drops of rain fell on them and trickled off again like so many tears; and the leafless branches of the limes moved mournfully about in the cold, damp air.

"Why, children, how mournful you look. Whatever is the matter? Is the old Tabby dead; or has Charlie lost some of his rabbits?"

"O papa, you know what it is! We are all so sorry it is wet for cousins to come," said Edith.

"Oh, that's it, is it? I see now; but I would not let it make me miserable if I were you. A pretty thing if your cousins were to come and find such sorrowful faces as yours are now. Perhaps it may not rain all day; and if it does I would not let it make me so unhappy. But here's mamma coming, and we must have prayers."

It was the custom at Sunberry Dale, at morning worship, for all who could read to be furnished with Bibles: then each one repeated a single text of Scripture, to be regarded as the repeater's motto for the day. After this a chapter was read verse by verse, all round, each child and servant reading in order, after which Mr. Melville offered prayer. The family worship at Sunberry Dale was liked by children and servants, and it became a source of help and pleasure to all, and was pleasantly remembered by them when far away from the dear old home.

The family worship helped the children to forget their disappointment about the weather; whilst Mrs. Melville's cheerful face and Mr. Melville's pleasant chat soon restored the smiles to all faces, and before breakfast was over the room rang with their laughter.

About mid-day the rain ceased, the clouds began to break away, and before the visitors arrived it was a fair, bright December afternoon. Mr. Melville met them at the Chesterton railway station, and just as the old clock,

which stood in the hall, struck four, Mark, who was watching at the window, saw the carriage turning into the drive from the highway and shouted, "Here they are!" There was a general rush towards the front door, and when the carriage drove up, Mrs. Melville and the children were standing in the porch to welcome them; and a great treat it was to be welcomed by Aunt Melville beneath the old porch at Sunberry Dale. There was very little fuss in her greeting, but they all said it was worth a long journey in the cold and wet to be folded at the end of it in Aunt Melville's arms, to feel her soft kiss pressed upon the cheek, to see the smile of gladness in every feature of her face, and to hear the words of welcome from her lips. It seemed to remove all tiredness and make one feel rested at once.

There was a great deal of chattering and laughter amongst them, as they stepped from the carriage and grouped themselves about their aunt and cousins; and Charlie was very busy, as usual, trying to do impossible things. He offered to carry all the wraps and traveling bags into the house at once, and after

loading himself with them, so that he looked like a bundle of walking rugs, he only reached the hall after dropping a muff and a basket in the wet, and falling down in the porch covered with his burden, from which he was extricated by his cousins with many jokes and much laughter.

In less than an hour the travellers had removed all traces of their journey, and were chatting cheerfully around the well-spread tea-table. Let us look at them as they sit smiling and happy amongst their cousins. There are four of them, Kate, George, Rupert, and Nellie. Kate, the eldest, is a pale, gentle, thoughtful looking girl of seventeen, with keen, black eyes, and dark clustering curls. She seems much older than she is, because of the earnest thoughtfulness that dwells so soberly in her countenance. Her younger sister and brother pay all deference to her, for, since their mother's death, a year and a-half ago, she has had often to counsel and cheer them in their difficulties, and to enter into their joys. They all tenderly loved her, and only wished that she would not be quite so quiet. To her father she was a great com-

fort; she had the most unselfish interest in his pleasure, and did all she could to promote it; he often smiled and called her his "ministering angel." George was about two years younger than Kate, with a disposition much like his cousin Charlie, full of fun and mischief; sometimes, though, rather selfish, and frequently vexing Kate by his thoughtlessness and wilfulness. Rupert was nearly fourteen. He was as sedate and quiet as his brother was restless and mischievous. Nobody could see his kind, loving face, and broad forehead, surrounded with its dark, curly hair, and not feel they could love and trust him. Kate often said he "was her right hand." He helped her in every way he could, and thought of himself only when he had done all he could for her. Nellie was a blue-eyed, fair-haired, merry child of ten; with a disposition as frolicsome as that of George, and as affectionate as that of Rupert. She flitted here and there like a beautiful butterfly and danced like a sunbeam through all the house.

Such was the happy group sitting around the tea-table at the Dale; they might well

be called a happy group, for bright smiles lit up every face, and merry words, and mirthful laughter were heard on all hands. It was late when the household retired to rest, there seemed to be so much to talk about, so many questions to ask, and so many things to anticipate and arrange.

Charlie and his cousin George occupied the same room, and long after most of the others were asleep, sounds that told of fun and mischief were heard issuing from their room. The old clock in the hall had struck twelve long before all were asleep; indeed it was only when Charlie and George heard its slow measured stroke that they realized their position, and with unnecessary noise and bustle made ready at once for bed.

CHAPTER III.

CHRISTMAS-EVE.

EARLY the following morning a strong north wind set in, and before mid-day all signs of the previous rain had passed away. The travellers seemed none the worse for the long journey of the previous day.

Greater part of the day was spent by the girls in unpacking and "getting straight," as they called it. The boys were engaged in going over the grounds, Charlie being particularly anxious to show his cousins his stock of rabbits. These rabbits were kept in a retired part of the garden, walled off for various purposes. The nearest way to it was across a large triangular flower-bed at one corner of the lawn, and many were the feuds between the gardener and Charlie, because the latter would persist in stepping across the flower-bed to reach the rabbit-

pens. These feuds generally ended in Charlie having the victory, his wit and fun making the vexed gardener forget his vexation in laughter at some droll antic or witty speech.

By the time the boys had finished their rambles, and the girls their unpacking and talking, the day was almost gone; and after a cozy tea, and what George and Charlie called "a jolly game at romps in the hall," they were all ready for the night's rest.

The morning of Christmas Eve was bitterly cold, but Mr. Melville thought a long walk would do them good. They all agreed about it, and soon after breakfast all the children were ready for it. Mark undertook to be guide, and all promised faithfully to follow. He took them his favourite walk, and pointed out the trees in which he had seen the squirrels play during the past summer, the spot where he had stood to listen to the nightingale in the dusk of the autumn evenings, and the place where he had once seen an encounter between a snake and a frog, in which he had helped the frog to escape. They reached home by dinner-time feeling tired and hungry.

The cold increased through the day, and all were glad to cluster round the fire in the library. The library at Sunberry Dale was a long room with two deep bay-windows looking out over a wide reach of green fields, from which it was separated only by a narrow strip of lawn, a low hedge, and a gravelled path. This room was the favourite one with all the Dale children; the bay-windows were their favourite seats in summer time, and with its soft carpet and heavy crimson curtains no room seemed so warm and cozy in the winter.

George and Nellie were standing looking through one of the windows, watching some wild fowl as they flew over the fields.

"Do you think it will snow, George? Mark says it will."

"How does Mark know it will snow?"

"He says he never saw the clouds look like they do now, without its snowing; and I am sure it 's dreadfully cold."

"Well, I don't know whether it will snow or not; I only hope it will, it is so jolly to have snow at Christmas."

"What are you young people talking about

here so seriously?" said Charlie, coming from the fire towards them.

"Young people, indeed! pray what age are you, Mr. Greybeard? Here's Nellie declaring it's going to snow. What do you say about it?"

"Well, I say that I think Nellie is right. I heard papa say he thought so, because of the clouds and the weather glass. I hope it will snow, because then it will seem like Christmas."

When they met in the library after tea there was a long debate as to what they should do, and there was much disagreement about it until Edith suggested a story from papa.

"Just the thing," said Kate.

"Just the thing, a story from uncle John;" shouted all the voices; and they surrounded his chair to demand it.

"But what is it to be about, children? I am afraid I can't manage it."

"Yes, you can, papa," said Edith.

"Do let it be a real Christmas story, uncle," said Nellie.

"I should like it to be about fairies, papa," said Edith.

"A Christmas story, and a story about fairies," said Mr. Melville. "I fear that is a difficult thing; however we will try."

The table was pushed back, and the children grouped themselves round the fire; Mr. Melville sitting in a large easy chair in the middle opposite the fire, with Edith on one side and Nellie on the other. As soon as they were all comfortably seated, he began his story of—

"THE CHRISTMAS FAIRY.

"You never saw a more beautiful creature than the Christmas Fairy. She was very, very tiny, but full of life and happiness, indeed she was so happy and cheerful at all times that all the inhabitants of fairy-land had unanimously agreed to call her 'Queen Joy.' She had a bright smile, and a kind word for everybody she met, and if she saw others in sorrow she instantly tapped them with her little wand which she called 'Peace,' and at once they became cheerful and happy. Queen Joy's possessions were not very numerous, but amongst them she had another wand which she called 'Good Purpose.' This wand she used chiefly at Christmas time; and she

was called the Christmas Fairy, because with this wand she was accustomed to incline many to do deeds of kindness and generosity at that season of the year in order to promote the happiness of others.

"One bright Christmas Eve, early in the morning, the Christmas Fairy stood in Christmas attire on the branch of a large yew tree in Squire Barton's park. She had on a tiny wreath of holly berries, and her bright scarlet dress was festooned with sprays of mistletoe, and in her hand she carried her Christmas wand 'Good Purpose.' If you had seen her as she stood on the yew branch you would certainly not have thought that 'Queen Joy' was a very suitable name for her. Her countenance was very grave and thoughtful, and not a smile lit it up as she stood leaning on her wand. You would have thought, perhaps, that she was cold and unhappy, for the ground was covered with snow which had been frozen quite hard during the night; and although there were some bright rays of sunshine dancing amongst the branches of the yew tree, yet a very cold wind was blowing over the kind little Fairy. She did not

feel the wind at all, and she was not thinking about the cold and frost; she was in one of her 'brown studies' and busy thinking how she could do most good, and render more people happy at this merry Christmas time.

"'Well,' said she, as she spoke aloud; 'I don't quite see what I can do. I am sure I want to make people happy, but really there are so many need making happier that I hardly know where to begin. However, that's no excuse for my standing idle here, so I'll just look round the village, see how things are, and then do the very best I can.'

"If you had seen her smile, and heard her merry little laugh as she said this, you would have changed your opinion, and said, Why, surely that is little 'Queen Joy,' the Christmas Fairy.

"No sooner was the resolution made than she began to carry it out, and started towards the village on her good errand. Almost as soon as she entered the street she came upon old widow Lane's house.

"'I wonder,' said the Fairy, 'whether widow Lane needs anything to make her more comfortable just now. I'll look in and

see.' And using the wonderful power she had of going into any place without being seen, she soon stood unobserved in the widow's little room. The old woman was sitting on a low chair trying to keep her hands warm by means of a few hot embers which were lying in the bottom of the little grate. As she sat swaying herself to and fro in the low rickety chair, the Fairy saw that tears were quietly trickling down her wrinkled cheeks, and noticed that she was speaking in a low, earnest tone to herself.

"'Ah, deary me,' said the old woman, 'times are sadly changed now. I remember when Christmas time used to come, I had plenty of fire to keep me warm, and plenty of good things to eat; but now, my coal is gone, and I have only some dry bread for my Christmas dinner; and all those who would have worked to keep me comfortable are dead and gone; and I am left quite alone now.'

"'Dear me,' said the Fairy, when she stood in the street again; 'this will never do. Who can I touch with my wand "Good Purpose," and give them an inclination to help this

poor woman?' and the bright little Fairy stood very thoughtfully for some moments. 'Ah, I know,' said she, smilingly. 'I'll touch Miss Grey, the merchant's daughter.'

"In a large and handsomely furnished room sat a young lady reading; this was Miss Grey, the only daughter of a wealthy merchant. She had read for some time with attention and interest, when she found that her thoughts were wandering in all directions, instead of being centred upon the book. She knew not the cause of this, but there on the back of her chair stood 'Queen Joy,' tapping her with 'Good Purpose.'

"'It is certainly no use for me to read any longer,' said she, closing the book. 'I can't get widow Lane out of my thoughts. I must go and see what I can do to make her happy at this merry Christmas time.'

"The Fairy smiled and tripped away, saying to herself, 'That's all right; widow Lane will be made happy.'

"Before the day had passed, widow Lane had a bright fire in her little grate and abundant Christmas provision in her pantry.

"'Now,' said the Fairy, as she stood on Mr. Grey's doorstep, 'I wonder what next I can do.' And lifting up her eyes she saw a long row of almshouses not far from where she stood. 'Ah, I should like all those old people to have a great treat to-morrow; but I am sure they can't afford to buy good Christmas fare out of their little stock of money. Whoever could I touch on their behalf? There's old Mr. Crusty, the miser; he could afford to help them, but I am afraid to try him. He has felt the tap of 'Good Purpose' so often without effect that I fear it would be useless. The last time I touched him I thought the wand would have broken with the force of my blow, but it was in vain. However I'll try him once more.'

"Mr. Crusty in a long, old coat, was sitting counting a bag of sovereigns by the side of a fire as poor as widow Lane's, when 'Queen Joy' entered his room and struck him with her wand on the shoulder. But it had no effect; he counted on. The Fairy struck him again. Still no effect. 'Oh dear,' sighed she, 'he is as hard as ever.' She hit him again harder than before. Presently he ceased

counting, and sat gazing into the fire. He began counting again, but soon stopped.

"'Whatever can make me be thinking about those almshouse folk this morning? I hope nobody is coming to beg for them this Christmas.'

"Queen Joy here struck him again. The old man proceeded with his counting, but soon stopped, and again gazed into the fire.

"'It's very strange that I can't get those almshouse folks out of my mind this morning. I am afraid I shall be obliged to give them something.'

"Here the Fairy struck him with her wand so energetically that 'Good Purpose' quite bent with the force of the blow.

"The old man fidgeted on his chair for a few minutes, and then laying on one side a small pile of sovereigns, said, 'Well, I suppose I must help them. I'll send them ten shillings each.'

"Queen Joy's countenance never looked brighter than when she came out of Mr. Crusty's house.

"During the morning the old people in the almshouses received the money from Mr.

Crusty, and were enabled to prepare for a merry Christmas.

"As Queen Joy passed up the street, she met little Willie Greedy looking at a half-crown, which was lying in the palm of his open hand. As he looked at the bright piece of silver, he was talking earnestly to himself.

"'It was very kind of Uncle John to give me half-a-crown; it was just what I wanted. I dare say my brother George would like me to divide it with him; but I shan't. I shall keep it all myself.'

"When the Fairy heard this she tapped him sharply with 'Good-Purpose,' as she passed.

"Willie still looked wistfully at his half-crown as he went on. Before he reached home, however, he said to himself, 'I think I will give George half of it. He is always kind to me. Yes, I will give him half.' As he entered the house he met his brother, and with his countenance glowing with pleasure, said to him, 'I say, George, look here! Uncle John has given me this half-crown; and I shall give you half of it.'

"'Thank you, Will. That's just what I had been wishing for. I'm so glad you will give it me.'

"As Queen Joy was passing a neat little cottage in the centre of the village, she heard a sound like a heavy sigh. She immediately turned into the cottage, and found an old blind woman sitting alone. Old widow Lardner was very comfortably provided for, but was obliged to spend most of the day alone, in consequence of her daughter being necessitated to go out to work. The old woman found it very dull alone, and was wishing somebody would come in and read to her.

"'I wonder what I could do to help old widow Lardner,' said the Fairy, when she stood again in the street. Whilst she stood wondering, two little girls came near, busily talking.

"'Are you busy this morning, Jane?'

"'Well, I thought of going in to read to old widow Lardner for a little while; but I don't think I shall now I've met you, Mary.'

"As soon as the Fairy heard this, she tapped Jane smartly with 'Good-Purpose.'

"'Then you will come with me for a walk, Jane.'

"'I don't know, Mary. I hardly know what to do.'

"Here the Fairy struck her with her wand again. After hesitating a short time, Jane looked up at her friend and said, 'No, Mary; I won't come this morning. I'll go and see widow Lardner.'

"In a short time the widow was seen listening with great interest and attention to the history of the wise men's visit to the infant Jesus, read by Jane.

"When the Fairy had seen the little girl go into the widow's cottage, she started at once for Mr. Surly's house. 'I think,' said she, 'I shall only pay this visit, and then give over, for I'm getting very tired, and it will soon be dark.'

"Mr. Surly had been offended by his only son, and would not visit him, although he had more than once been invited to do so. When the Fairy entered Mr. Surly's house, he was bemoaning his prospect of a solitary Christmas.

"'I almost think I'll give in, and accept

Harry's invitation to spend Christmas-day with him and his family. I shall be very dull here alone. But I don't know, though; he ought not to have offended me. I think I shall stop at home after all.'

"At once 'Good-Purpose' fell on his shoulders with great force.

"'No, it's too bad; he ought to have done as I wished him. I don't think I shall forgive him and go to his house yet, at any rate.'

"Here the Fairy struck him three blows with such vigour that 'Good-Purpose' almost snapped in two.

"The old man started up, and began to walk to and fro in the room, evidently very uncomfortable. At last he sat down at his desk, saying, 'It's no use; I'll write a note and say I shall spend to-morrow with him.'

"When the note was written and sent, it was nearly dark, and the Christmas Fairy felt weary and exhausted; but she wore still a smiling face, and carried a very happy little heart.

"'Well, well,' said she, as she rested herself on the branch of a holly tree, 'I am

glad I tried to make somebody happy; and though I am very tired with my day's work, and I have not been able to do much, yet I have tried to use "Good-Purpose" well. Oh, I am pleased that I have made this Christmas time pleasant to somebody!'

"In the abundance of her joy, the Christmas Fairy trolled out a little fairy ballad, and then nestling her head against a neighbouring spray, fell fast asleep."

"Thank you, papa," cried Edith, as soon as Mr. Melville had finished. "That's one of your own nice stories, papa."

"Thank you, papa; thank you, uncle," came in a joyous chorus from all.

CHAPTER IV.

CHRISTMAS-DAY.

THE prophecies of the young people about the weather had certainly proved correct, for it had been snowing all night, and Christmas morning revealed a "white world." The ground was dry, and the snow piled itself everywhere. It had fallen on the leafless branches of the lime trees, until they seemed to be decked in glistening silver robes, and dropped a shower of glistening gems as some bird from the neighbouring wood suddenly alighted on the boughs. It had fallen so rapidly that it entirely concealed the grass of the orchard that stretched away to the road on the other side of the *fossé*. The great trees of Leyoak Park which skirted the orchard, looked like giants with hoary crowns, and Charlie said, "the old sun-dial on the

lawn looked like a dwarf judge in a white wig and ermine robes." The snow had piled itself along the eaves and on the gables of the old house until you might have fancied that some fairy hands had beaded it with silver during the hours of the night.

It was still snowing when the family gathered for breakfast—falling silently and rapidly, until it was difficult to make out the outline of the drive up to the house. The great white flakes piled themselves up so speedily on the lawn, that the sun-dial seemed likely to be soon partially buried in its ample snowy robes. The sculptured figures that stood here and there in the large garden looked extremely cold and uncomfortable as the snow heaped itself on their heads or drifted into their faces. Rupert said that it made him cold to look at them; whilst George declared they were "the jolliest guys he had seen a long time."

Charlie was the last to make his appearance, but there was no mistaking who was coming when he opened the door.

"Bravo, bravo! Here 's a jolly Christmas snow for you. A merry Christmas to you,

mamma, dear. A merry Christmas to you, papa. Merry Christmas to you, Kate, Nellie, Edith. The ladies first, of course. A merry Christmas to you, Mark, Rupert, and George." And the bright, mischievous lad shook each heartily by the hand, and bowed with mock gravity to all.

The bells of Chesterton parish church were ringing gaily, they had been ringing almost all night. Kate and Edith said they had heard them hours before, but the boys and Nellie had slept too soundly. There were footprints of children on the snow leading from the gate to the house, whilst round the porch the snow was trodden as though many feet had been trampling there.

"Whose footprints are those on the snow?" said Charlie, as he looked from the window. "Have you children been dancing there this morning?"

"Don't be so foolish, Charlie," said Mark. "You know better."

"Perhaps the Christmas Fairy has been having a dance there, Charlie," said Kate.

"Then she must have a good many feet of different sizes," replied Charlie.

"I 'll tell you whose footmarks they are," said Edith. "They are the carol-singers."

"Did you hear them sing, Edith?" said Charlie.

"Yes; I and Kate were awake, and heard them sing all their carols."

"What a bore that you didn't wake me."

"Yes, it was a shame, Charlie. They never even woke me," said Nellie.

"Well, never mind," said Mr. Melville. "I hope you all heard sweet songs in your dreams."

The bells kept on ringing, saying as cheerily as any Christmas bells could say it, "A merry, merry Christmas to you." Everybody seemed glad in the house, and, like the bells in Chesterton tower, wished everybody else "a merry Christmas."

The old house looked quite gay inside on that Christmas morning; there were evergreens nearly everywhere, and the long, old-fashioned hall was transformed into a bower of greenery. The breakfast-room looked its gayest, there were Christmas boughs in all directions. Ivy leaves of burnished green, and scarlet-berried holly seemed to smile

upon you from all points,—on the lamp, in the vases, round the pictures, and in the window; whilst the looking-glass was almost hidden, and looked quite gay and new again, in a wreath of scarlet and green.

Perhaps the point of greatest interest to the children, was the breakfast table, for, besides the usual display of china and plate, there were some very curiously shaped packets, of various sizes, all round the table. These parcels were wrapped in white paper, and tied with narrow scarlet ribbon; there was one by each plate where the children sat, and wistful were the glances cast at them by those whose names were written upon them.

When they took their places at the table, the children were eager to untie the ribbon and expose the contents of the parcels, and were only stopped by Mr. Melville saying, "Breakfast first, breakfast first, children; and the Christmas Fairy's parcels after."

Those mysterious parcels certainly had more attention than the grilled ham, cold tongue, and hot toast.

"Mark," said Nellie, who sat next to him, "do you know what is in your parcel?"

"No; indeed I don't, Nellie."

"It is not the same thing as mine, for yours is long and thin, and mine feels like a box. I wonder what it is. I do so want to know."

"We must wait patiently, Nellie."

"Oh, waiting is very well for you; but I can't wait for anything; I always want it at once."

"I say, George, yours looks the same as mine," said Charlie. "I believe mine is a book."

"I fancy mine is a book too," said Rupert.

"I can't tell at all what mine is," said Edith. "It seems like a little basket wrapped up."

"I have finished my breakfast, papa," said Charlie. "May I open my parcel now?"

"Not yet, my boy. When we have all finished breakfast, mamma and I will retire, and you must open them as soon as we are gone."

"Then I wish they had all done breakfast this very minute," said Nellie.

"Then you want to get rid of me and your aunt?" said Mr. Melville, laughing.

"No, uncle; not that," said Nellie, blushing. But I am in such a fidget to know what is in my parcel."

Mr. and Mrs. Melville had hardly left the room when the eager children began to open their packets. They were too anxious to untie the ribbon, it was broken or slipped off in the quickest way.

"Hurrah, hurrah!" shouted Charlie. "I have got the jolliest copy of 'Old Jack,' just what I wanted."

"I have the same," said George. "What have you got, Rupert?"

"A beautiful Bible with a rim and clasps. Isn't it kind of uncle and aunt?"

"Oh dear me!" said Nellie. "I can't get this ribbon off. It's gone into a knot."

"Let me cut it," said Mark.

"Whatever is it," said Nellie, as she tore the paper off. "Oh, do look, Kate! It's the loveliest box of Loto I ever saw."

"What a lot of paper there is round mine," said Edith, as she unrolled her parcel. "Whatever can it be? Oh, see! it's made of blue velvet and brown leather, with handles like a basket. I know now what it

is; it 's a Lady's Companion. I saw it in a window, and wished for it one day. How kind of mamma to get it."

Kate found a small gold locket in her parcel, and Mark a gold pencil case in his.

Before the treasures had been fully examined, the children rushed into the library to Mr. and Mrs. Melville, and were loud in their professions of gratitude and expressions of thanks; all declaring they were "the kindest and best papa and mamma, and uncle and aunt in all the land."

The family at the Dale attended the Chesterton parish church, but the snow rendered it almost impossible for all to go on this day; so it was decided that the girls should remain at home with Mrs. Melville, and the boys go to church with Mr. Melville. It was still snowing when they started, but wrapped in warm coats, and feet cased in goloshes, the boys took no harm, and enjoyed the excitement of it.

They dined early at Sunberry Dale, for Mr. Melville said he liked the old-fashioned plan best. The children said there was no dinner in all the year they enjoyed so much

as that on Christmas-day; and the boys said it was better than ever, after their walk through the snow.

Perhaps the happiest time of the day was after tea. A bright fire was burning in the large old-fashioned grate in the drawing-room, and the light danced on the shining leaves of the holly which decorated the pictures on the walls, and glanced on the polished legs of tables and chairs, and threw long grotesque shadows on the ceiling, as the children sat on foot-stools and on the hearth-rug, and asked each other riddles, and told Christmas stories. Then, when the lamps were lighted, they had games of all kinds; and, at last, when they were tired of these, they sat all round the fire, "like a large fender," Nellie said, and repeated Scripture texts about the advent of Christ, and sang nearly all the carols and hymns they knew. And when they said "Good-night," they all agreed it was the happiest Christmas they had ever spent.

CHAPTER V.

MR. MELVILLE'S SERMON.

THE young people were rather late in rising the next morning, for all had slept long and soundly after the mirth and pleasure of the previous day; they were, however, down to breakfast by the usual hour. Mr. and Mrs. Melville were very particular that breakfast should not be later on Sunday morning than on other mornings; they were anxious that all should have the opportunity of going to church, as regularly as possible, and they knew that late rising and late breakfasts would prevent this. It was knowledge of this that hurried the children in dressing, and caused them to be in the breakfast-room so soon.

Sundays at Sunberry Dale were always pleasant. The house seemed as quiet as the

world outside: the same Sabbath stillness found its way into all the rooms and corners of the old house, and affected even Charlie, for he was less thoughtless and boisterous than on other days. I cannot tell you anything particular about the mode of spending the Sabbath at the Dale; it was a nameless charm that spread itself over the day, and made it a holy and happy time to all. There was nothing of gloom in the Sundays at Sunberry Dale; everything was done to increase the leisure of the servants, and to promote the pleasure of all in the house. Mr. and Mrs. Melville were calm and joyous themselves, and sought to impart their own peace and joy to others; even the children were never sorry for Sunday to come, and never glad when its hours were gone.

The snow-flakes still fell when they gathered in the breakfast-room; but far less rapidly than on the previous morning. The snow was now very deep, and some of the lanes in which it had drifted around Chesterton, were almost impassable. The mail-cart had been delayed by it on the previous day,

and the letters had not reached the Dale until the afternoon.

Mr. Melville and the boys went to church in the morning, but found it so difficult to get through the untrodden snow, that when they returned to dinner, it was decided that it would be unwise to attempt to go out again during the day.

"Whatever shall we all do this evening, then?" said Edith, as they sat at dinner.

"I know what I should like," said Mark.

"What's that?" inquired George.

"I think I can tell," said Edith. "You would like to sing hymns, and ask Scripture questions."

"No," said Mark. "That would be pleasant, but it is something better than that." And he looked towards his mamma and smiled.

"Mark's smile directed all eyes towards Mrs. Melville, and they saw that she was smiling too.

"Oh, mamma, you know what it is. I am sure you do. Please tell us," said Edith, coaxingly.

"I can only guess, my dear. Mark has not told me."

"What is it, aunt? What is it, mamma?" shouted a chorus of voices.

"Mrs. Melville looked towards her husband at the other end of the table, and smiling, said, "I think Mark would like his papa to have a service at home, and give us an address."

"Yes, mamma. That 's just it," said Mark.

Mr. Melville looked up in astonishment.

"Oh, uncle," said Nellie, tapping the table with her hands. "Do have a service at home, and preach us a nice sermon."

"My dear, I am not a clergyman; how can you expect me to preach a sermon?"

"Yes, you can, papa," said Charlie. "You preached a sermon to us, in this room, one wet evening last winter.

After much entreaty, Mr. Melville promised to give them a little address—"sermon" the children called it—in the evening.

At half-past six the children and servants gathered in the library. Mark had undertaken the arrangement of the room. He had placed the chairs in rows down the centre,

and put his mother's Davenport, with a scarlet sofa cushion upon it, for a desk for his papa, on one side of the fire-place. A bright fire was burning in the grate, and Nellie said, "It was nicer than the church; it was warmer."

Mr. Melville read a few of the prayers from the Liturgy, and then they sang the following simple hymn from the children's favourite hymn-book:—

"Little drops of water,
Little grains of sand,
Make the mighty ocean,
And the beauteous land.

"And the little moments—
Humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages
Of eternity.

"Little acts of kindness,
Little words of love,
Make our earth an Eden,
Like the heaven above.

"So our little errors
Lead the soul away
From the paths of virtue,
Oft in sin to stray.

"Little seeds of mercy,
Sown by youthful hands,
Rise to bless the nations,
Far in heathen lands."

When they had sung the hymn, Mr. Melville opened the large family Bible, which had been placed on the stand before him, and said, "I shall take a very short text and preach a very short sermon this evening, and I hope we shall all be interested and profited. My text is composed of only four words and you will find them in the Book of Exodus, the 23d chapter, and the beginning of the 30th verse—

"'. . . . By little and little.'

"Some time since, I read this description of the motto of a distinguished scholar in America. There was the picture of a mountain, with a man at its base, with his hat and coat lying beside him, and a pick-axe in his hand; and as he digs, stroke by stroke, his patient look corresponds with his words, "*Peu et peu*"—little by little.

"This then is my motto to-day, 'By little and little.'

"We must set it down as certain that everything that is worth having or being, must be striven after. We cannot become good or great without patiently trying to become so; and men often reach the position they wish for, only after long striving; it is 'by little and little' that they reach it. And this is true, also, of those who are known as the most wicked and depraved; men do not often become very bad at once, it is 'by little and little,' by yielding to one temptation after another, that they reach the paths of greatest wickedness.

"You have watched the erection of some building; first there was a large hole dug to receive the foundation; then stone was placed upon stone until the building was complete. *By little and little* it reached its completion. During the past summer, you were delighted by many rambles amongst the corn fields, and if you thought much about the corn, you would remember how first there had been the little green *blade* springing up in the cold, wintry weather, then, as the days grew longer and warmer, there came the *ear;* then, as the bright

beautiful autumn time came on, there was *the full corn in the ear.* 'By little and little' it had grown till you saw the fields covered with the golden harvest.

"Perhaps you have seen a ship built. First the great timbers were placed in the shape which it was intended the vessel should take, then plank after plank was secured in its place until the vessel was fitted to float away on the waters of the great river.

"Now all these things are something like us and our work in the world. Our characters are *formed,* they *grow* to goodness or wickedness. We become bad, we become good, or we do great good 'by little and little.'

"This teaches us that it is wise to attend to little things, that in reality little things, as we call them, are important, because they are the things that make up our lives, the materials which form our characters and compose our careers. If we speak bad words, if we do unkind and wrong deeds, our lives will not be good, because we are making them of bad material. I sometimes hear young people say when about to do something they

know is wrong, 'Oh, it is not much, it is only for this once.' Suppose the shipbuilder were to say about a rotten piece of timber, 'Oh, it's only one, put it in.' You would expect to hear soon of that vessel going down in the great sea. Or suppose the weaver were to say about a bad warp, 'Oh, it's only this one, put it in.' You would know that the whole fabric would be spoiled and worthless. So we must be careful about the things which make up our lives or they too will become evil and worthless.

"Now, the first lesson I want you to remember is this,—*Be careful to resist all temptations to wrong.* You have, perhaps, seen a man make a chain, he makes it link by link, and as each link is added to the others so the chain is increased in size and strength. Bad habits are very much like the links of the chain; they are formed one by one, one leads to another, and as these bad habits are formed so men become involved in sin, its power grows every day stronger, and evil characters are formed and established.

You must beware of the beginning. When you are tempted to do wrong, resist the

temptation. Do not think it is 'only for once;' if you yield to that one temptation you will find it easier to yield next time, and so the links of the chain of evil will be increased, and the chain made stronger.

"It is very, *very* important to attend to the beginning of evil, to resist the *first* temptation. If you look at the branch line of a railway, you will see that at the spot where the carriages first begin to run on the curved rail it is very small, and runs alongside the main-line for a little way, then turns gradually until a great distance is placed between it and the main line. So if you yield to temptation it may appear trifling at first, but every day it will lead you further away from the paths of goodness and peace.

"There have been many bright-eyed, happy lads, whose first step in the way to ruin and disgrace was disobedience to parents. This led to the telling of falsehoods, and this to other sins, until they have found themselves branded as felons; '*by little and little*' they formed habits and characters of evil, and at last found themselves disgraced and shunned.

Many a gallant vessel has gone down in the waves through springing a leak; perhaps a very small hole made in the ship's side, but that little hole was neglected until the water rushing in beyond control the vessel was wrecked. *Beware then of the first wrong step;* resist *all* temptation to wrong, and be firm in your resistance.

"You may sometimes think that the wrong which you are tempted to do will not be very great nor very injurious; but don't be deceived about it, every sin is great, every wrong is injurious; and if that wrong is done and that sin gets a lodgement in your heart it will certainly grow until it is stronger than you. Do not encourage sin in any way. Pray to Jesus for strength to resist all temptation. He will help you if you ask Him, for He has promised His grace to those who seek Him, and He always fulfils His promises.

"The second lesson I wish you to learn is this,—*Be encouraged in your efforts to be good.* There are many difficulties to be overcome in becoming a good man, one who loves and follows the Saviour steadfastly. You must

not be discouraged, because you find sometimes old sins and bad temper having power over you, so that you seem to be as far as ever from being as good as you desire. If you were climbing a high mountain you would not find yourself at the top in one great stride; you would have to toil up the ascent step by step, and perhaps when you reached what appeared to you the top you would find that the summit was far above you still, and the point you had reached only one of several found on the way to the mountain top. But this would not discourage you and make you resolve to go down again. It would rather make you more vigorous and determined to climb to the top. So in striving to be good, do not expect to become perfect at once. It is 'by little and little' that you can become what Jesus desires you to be; but you must be always striving. You must not let difficulties nor disappointments hinder you. If you think that you did not love Christ enough yesterday, try to love Him more to-day. If you think you did not do work enough for Christ yesterday, wrok more for Him to-day. If you find you

have had wrong thoughts and feelings lately, try to get rid of them to-day. Do not be discouraged, because of these things, only try the more to be as good as you *can* be, 'and little by little' you will grow to be what you *desire* to be. Remember that you boys and girls cannot become men and women at once, you must grow day by day and year by year until you reach that position; so you must strive to grow in goodness day by day. Strive to acquire more right thoughts about God and His truth. Foster all holy and tender feelings. Pray constantly to be able to do all right and kind deeds.

"Do not be discouraged if you fail sometimes. Think how the man who wishes to become a scholar cannot become one at once, he must learn the A B C; he must acquire knowledge 'little by little,' and if he continue to strive he will one day reach the position he desires. So you, my dear children, must always strive to be good, to be truthful, to be honest, to be kind, to do right, to love Jesus, and then 'little by little' you will grow to be like Him.

"The third lesson I wish you to learn is

this,—*Be encouraged to do all the good you can.* Those who wish to do great things at *once* generally do nothing at all. It is by doing good at all times and on all occasions, by adding one good deed to another, 'by little and little' that great good is done by most people in the world. In the great Pacific ocean there are many beautiful islands which have been reared up from the bottom of the deep by the little coral insect. This insect only deposits one grain of sand at a time, and yet 'little by little,' by continuous exertion the whole of those islands have been thus reared. Just so is it with most of the good done in the world, it is accomplished by small but continued exertions. If we think about the great good which missionary societies are doing now, we shall see how true this is. Missionary work in foreign lands did not become as extensive as it is now all at once. It had a very small beginning; only a few men were interested in it, and they could not get much money at first. But these men loved the work, and they persevered in doing what they could; they made others think and feel like themselves, and so

'little by little' missionary work has become what it is.

"You may often think that you can do very little good, that what you can do is so small that it is not worth doing at all. Do not think so; even the smallest thing you can do will help in some way. Remember the verses you sometimes sing,—

"'Suppose the little cowslip
Should hang its golden cup,
And say, "I'm such a tiny flower,
I'd better not grow up;"
How many a weary traveller
Would miss its fragrant smell!
How many a little child would grieve
To lose it from the dell!

"'Suppose the glistening dew-drop
Upon the grass should say,
"What can a little dew-drop do?
I'd better roll away;"
The blade on which it rested,
Before the day was done,
Without a drop to moisten it,
Would wither in the sun.

"'Suppose the little breezes,
Upon a summer's day,
Should think themselves too small to cool
The traveller on his way;

Who would not miss the smallest
And softest ones that blow,
And think they made a great mistake
If they were talking so?

"'How many deeds of kindness
A little child may do,
Although it has so little strength,
And little wisdom too!
It wants a loving spirit,
Much more than strength, to prove
How many things a child may do
For others by its love.'

"Then do not be discouraged. Do all you can; it may not seem to you much, but if you continue to do what you can it will in the end make very much. Ask Jesus to accept your service, remembering that he estimates it not by its quantity, but by the motives which prompt it. The two little mites which the poor widow cast into the treasury were more acceptable to Him than the great gifts of the rich man, because they were as much as she could possibly give, and were given in love. Jesus accepts little services if they are done, because the doers love Him. King David desired to build a temple for God, but he was not permitted to

do *that*, yet he did what he could towards it, he procured the land, and left it for the site of the glorious temple which his son Solomon built. And God was pleased with David for doing what he could, and because there was a desire in his heart to do much more. Then let our hearts be filled with desires after good. Let us try so to love the tender and gracious Saviour that we shall feel we must serve Him, because we love Him. Let us ask Him to enable us to resist temptation, to strive to be good and to do good, then He will look kindly on us also, and 'by little and little' we shall be better fitted to serve Him on earth, and prepared to be with Him in heaven for ever."

At the close of the address they sang the Evening Hymn, and all the children said "they had spent a very pleasant Sunday evening."

CHAPTER VI.

SNOW-BALLING.

THE snow had ceased falling on Monday morning, and the sun shone out brightly, although the wind was still blowing from the north, and during the night a keen frost had set in.

It was decided by the boys to have a game at snow-balling on the lawn after breakfast; so, as soon as that meal was over, there was a general rush after caps, goloshes, and comforters.

"Wrap yourselves up well, lads," said Mr. Melville. "It's very cold."

"All right, papa. We shall soon be warm enough," said Charlie.

Mrs. Melville and the girls stood at the breakfast-room window to watch the sport; whilst Mr. Melville sat down to read the paper.

The boys had wrapped woollen scarves round their necks till they almost hid their faces, and one or two of them had put on warm woollen gloves.

"Oh, aunt, just look at Charlie!" said Nellie. "Whatever has he got round his neck?"

"It looks like fur," said Kate.

"So it is, my dear. Why, it's my old victorine," said Mrs. Melville.

"And look, mamma," said Edith, "the tails are hanging down behind."

"There's Mark coming now," said Kate. "Why, he can hardly walk, his coat is so long."

"He has your uncle's old coat on, my dear."

"What's that about my coat?" said Mr. Melville, looking up from his paper.

"Mark has your old grey coat on, papa," said Edith. "Come and see him."

Mr. Melville got up from his chair, and came and stood with the group at the window. Very soon the snowballs began to fly about, and merry shouts and loud laughter were heard on the lawn.

"It looks like another snow-storm almost," said Edith.

"They are rather large snow-flakes," said Mr. Melville.

"I shouldn't like to be out in a snow-storm if the flakes were as big as those snow-balls," said Nellie. "I'm sure they would soon break my umbrella."

Two or three times the group round the window drew back suddenly, as some snow-ball missed its mark, and losing its way, came against the window.

"I think I will go and join them," said Mr. Melville. "I have not had a game of snow-balling for years."

Mrs. Melville laughed heartily.

"May I come with you, uncle?" said Nellie.

"I don't know," said her uncle. "What will aunt say?"

"May I go, aunt? Oh, do let me go! I should so enjoy it! Please say yes, aunt!"

Mrs. Melville smiled, and looked rather doubtful for a moment or two.

"Let her go, aunt," said Kate. "It won't hurt her if she does not stop too long, and

she can put on dry boots and stockings when she comes in."

Mrs. Melville laughed, and said "Yes," as desired.

"Thank you, aunt. That is good. Come along, uncle," said Nellie, as she took his hand and drew him to the door.

In a short time, Mr. Melville, in an old rough coat and travelling cap, and Nellie in a garden bonnet and a thick veil, were seen on the lawn.

"I say, look here, chaps," said Charlie, "here's papa;" and before Mr. Melville could look round, two or three snowballs were thrown at him. One of them hit him on the side of his ear, and he was obliged to stop and shake himself, and wipe the snow out of his neck and ear, amidst the hearty laughter of the boys on the lawn, and the girls in the breakfast-room.

"Stop, stop a minute," said he, as the balls flew thick and fast about him. "Let me get breath before I begin."

"Here's one for the veiled lady," said George, as he threw one at Nellie.

"Ah, but you didn't hit the veiled lady,"

and she threw one at him, which covered his face and neck with snow.

"Hurrah for the lady of the veil," shouted Rupert, whilst they all laughed heartily at George's efforts to free himself from the snow.

Mr. Melville was busy filling his pockets with snowballs, and very soon he was chasing the boys in all directions, especially charging Charlie and George, who were soon glad to shout for a truce.

The girls and Mrs. Melville seemed to enjoy it almost as much as those who were outside, and the servants who had gathered at one of the upper windows were laughing uproariously.

When they were tired of snow-balling, and Nellie and her uncle had gone into the house, Rupert proposed they should make a large snowball. They all agreed, and commenced at once. A small heap of snow was first piled together, and pressed hard, and then it was rolled round and round the lawn, until it grew so large that the united strength of the four boys was unequal to move it, and it was left standing in front of the porch.

After this they were tired, and went into the house to change their clothes, and then to sit and laugh over the fun of their snow-balling.

After dinner, Mark and Rupert went into the breakfast-room to have a "little quiet," as they said, leaving the others to enjoy themselves in the library. Mark sat down to read, and Rupert to write a letter to his papa. When he had finished his letter, he went and stood at the window, and looked out at the snowed landscape.

"I say, Rupert, what are you doing at the window so long?"

"I'm looking at this great snowball."

"I should have thought you had looked at that enough this morning."

"It set me thinking."

"What about?"

"Why, about uncle's address last night."

"How could it make you think about that?"

"In this way. I thought of the way we made the ball, how small it was at first, and how, 'by little and little,' it became the size it is; and then I wished I might grow to be good and useful some time."

"Oh, I see! I often wish the same thing, Rupert; but it seems such *slow* work."

"And very *hard* work too, Mark."

"Yes. I do want to grow up as good as papa, but I am so often discouraged, that I think I never shall."

"You must try always. It seems to me that nearly all the good and great men I read about were once poor, and had to work their way up bit by bit."

"Papa often tells me that."

"Yes; and mamma often said so to me; and one day, just before she died, she said, 'Rupert, strive to be a *good man;* never mind being a great man, be a good man, for, after all, goodness is the truest greatness.'"

"I suppose you will never forget that."

"I hope not, because I am sure it's true. I would rather be a good man than anything else. Papa told me once that Jesus Christ was great because of His power, but He was *greatest* because of His goodness; that men love Him, not because of His power so much, but because of His love and goodness."

"That's just how I feel, Rupert."

"So do I; and don't you think, Mark, that the men who have done most good in the world have been most like Jesus Christ?"

"Yes, I do. I often read the lives of men who have been great in war or in science, or something else, but I never feel that they were really so great as some I read about who were great because they tried to be good men, and tried to do good to others."

"You mean such men as Felix Neff, Dr. Carey, and Dr. Judson?"

"Yes."

"And look at the difficulties they met with, and how hard they had to work to overcome them. They seem never to have been daunted. They went right on in the way they had chosen, no matter who laughed at them or tried to hinder them."

"That was because they felt they were right, and were patient and persevering."

"Papa often says that perseverance is the key to all success," said Rupert.

Just then the bell rang for tea, and a servant came to inquire if "Master Rupert's

letter was ready for post." The boys were right; the secret of all progress in life is *earnest, persevering work;* and the secret of *true greatness* is loving God sincerely, and serving Him faithfully.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

When the letters were delivered at the Dale the next morning there was one from Mr. Melville's only unmarried sister, Lucy, saying that she intended coming to spend a few weeks at the Dale, and would be with them that same day about noon. This was a most unexpected announcement, for all thought that Aunt Lucy was too lame to leave her home. However, there was no mistake about it, for she wished them to meet the mid-day train.

Miss Melville was several years younger than her brother, she was nearly as tall as he; and the smooth braids of her brown hair were streaked with silver as plentifully as his.

Everybody loved Aunt Lucy. To the Dale

children and their cousins she was the embodiment of love and kindness. She had nursed them in many of their illnesses, and spent hours in making toys to amuse them in younger days. Nobody like Aunt Lucy to tell stories; and as to games she seemed to know an endless number.

You may easily imagine what a stir Aunt Lucy's letter caused at Sunberry Dale on that Tuesday morning. Everybody wanted to meet her; but the carriage would not hold everybody, so everybody could not go. Charlie and George and Nellie were frantic with delight, and kept the house in a continuous uproar all the morning.

When the carriage stopped at the door about mid-day, it seemed rather likely that Aunt Lucy would be forcibly carried into the house, so boisterous was the joy.

"Gently, gently, children; you will pull me to pieces," said she.

"That 's what I call being taken by storm," said Mr. Melville, laughing.

"I think so too, brother," said Miss Melville.

"Well, aunt, it 's only a storm of hugs and

kisses; and you mustn't mind that, because we are so glad to see you," said Charlie.

After dinner the excitement subsided a little, and Miss Melville spent the afternoon in quietly talking over some business matters with her brother and his wife.

In the evening they all gathered in the library, and a pleasant group it was sitting round the bright fire. Aunt Lucy had the "very easiest chair," Charlie said he could find, and with the firelight playing on her countenance and the glow of the warm crimson curtains behind her she did look, as Nellie said, "one of the very nicest of aunts."

"Now, aunt, you must please tell us a story," said Edith.

"A story, my dear! why, I should think you have heard all my stories."

"Oh, no, we haven't," said George. "You know no end of stories."

"Yes, that 's quite true, aunt," said Nellie. "I am sure you know lots."

"I am not so sure about that, my dear," said Aunt Lucy, smiling. "But, however, I 'll try and tell you about—

"MADAM SQUIRREL, AND HER DISOBEDIENT CHILDREN.

"Greyley Park was a very large and pleasant place, with its thick woods, its green drives, and long shady walks. It was well filled with many kinds of trees, but, perhaps, the finest trees in it were the beeches; they were very old, large, and very numerous, so that when the thick underwood was cleared away at certain seasons, their tall straight trunks, clustered together, bearing up a heavy mass of foliage high overhead, made you think of the pillars and vaulted roof of some grand old cathedral. Perhaps one of the finest beech trees in Greyley Park was one which stood very near to old Squire Tenderden's filbert ground, which skirted just one corner of the great park, and was only divided from it by a low hedge and a carriage road.

"Early one morning in spring a fine brown squirrel was seen springing from one tree to another in the park near to the old Squire's garden. The movements of this squirrel seemed to puzzle the birds very much, who,

as they sat nestling among the branches of the trees, were often disturbed by the frisking about of this lady squirrel. She was evidently looking for something of importance, for she spent a long time in jumping from one tree to another and carefully examining their trunks and branches.

"Madam Squirrel was in fact looking for a home, but evidently was very difficult to please as to the situation of the house she would like.

"She ran up a large chestnut tree and perching upon one of its topmost branches looked carefully about her; but she shook her head and ran down very speedily; evidently that would not do.

"She ran about in the grass for some time and then came to a tall fir tree; she threw her head back and looked up to its top, thought a little about matters, and then sprang up its straight dark trunk. She ran round and round it until she reached the top, and sitting down on an out-stretching branch looked around her again. A blackbird who was perched on a higher branch of the same tree, and who had been watching her some

time, saw her shake her head again and run down to the grass once more.

"She passed a great many trees of various kinds until she came to the fine old beech tree standing near the filbert ground; this at once arrested her attention, and she ran up it with great speed. She had gone up about half-way, when a round hole in the trunk caught her eye; she stopped, put her head inside to look, frisked her tail and jumped through it. After a few moments her sharp bright eyes were seen at the hole again, and presently she came out with a very pleased look on her face, and as she perched herself on a branch near, with her bushy tail coiled up overhead, and turned her gaze first on one side and then on the other, she was heard to say, 'This is nice, just the house I wanted. It is high up in the tree, and has a very good entrance, and I do really believe I can see Squire Tenderden's filbert trees from here. That's better still, I shall settle here at once.'

"Madam Squirrel had not many goods to move, so the same day she settled down in her new house in the old beech tree.

"After several weeks had passed away the

birds, who lived in the trees near the old beech, began to hear strange noises in Madam Squirrel's house, and one fine day they were astonished by seeing two little brown squirrels sitting by Madam Squirrel near the entrance to her house. These were her two sons, and she was busy teaching them to crack nuts. As the days passed on they grew very much, and became quite active in getting about amongst the trees in their neighbourhood; and madam was evidently very proud of her sons.

"As these young squirrels grew older they began to think they knew as much as their mother, and were sometimes very angry because she would not allow them to roam far from their home alone; and instead of being grateful to her for the fine nuts she brought them to eat, they would sometimes throw them out at the door saying, 'they could find better than those if she would only let them go where they liked.'

"Madam assured them 'it was difficult to get nuts at all, and that it would be very dangerous indeed for them to try to get them, they were so young and inexperienced.' At this these unkind and ungrateful young

squirrels only turned up their heads and laughed.

"For two or three days madam had brought some fine bunches of filberts to her sons, and with these they were exceedingly pleased. After enjoying these for some days, they asked their mother to allow them to accompany her when she next went to seek them. This she refused at once, saying they were too young for such a dangerous expedition.

"The young squirrels were very much displeased at their mother's refusal, and after a long private talk determined to go to the filbert ground by themselves some day when their mother was from home.

"About a week after this madam was obliged to go out into the woods to see some friends, and would be away some hours. She gave her children many kind cautions.

"'Be sure you keep near home while I am away. Don't go near the filbert ground, it is very dangerous, for yesterday I saw the Squire's gardener with a gun watching the filbert trees, and I had great difficulty in getting home with that bunch of nuts I

brought you. I must not go there myself again yet.'"

"They both promised to be obedient and good, and madam departed with a peaceful mind.

"The young squirrels watched their mother out of sight, and then began to laugh and talk very loudly.

"'Oh, it 's nonsense for her to expect us to stop here all day,' said one.

"'Well, what will you do?' said the other.

"'Oh, I shall go and get some filberts.'

"'But suppose the man fires his gun.'

"'Perhaps he won't be there, and if he is we can turn back.'

"'But we promised mother to stop at home.'

"'Oh, we shall be back soon, and she won't know anything about it.'

"'Very well; let us go.'

"The young squirrels then sprang from tree to tree till they came to the edge of the park, and opposite to the filbert ground. They looked round, and seeing no danger ran down the tree and across the road into the filbert

ground. They found the trees loaded with nuts, and began at once to gather and crack them.

"The young squirrels had been enjoying themselves for half an hour, when they heard a stealthy step amongst the leaves on the ground, and looking down they saw the gardener pointing his gun at them. They screamed, dropped their nuts, and began to run away. There was a bang, a great smoke, and one of the squirrels dropped down, amongst the leaves on the ground, dead. The other crept away wounded.

"It was late in the afternoon when madam returned. She was surprised as she came near to hear no noise in her home; but she thought that perhaps her children had grown tired and had gone to sleep, so she entered her house very quietly, but they were not there. She went out and called them, but she heard no answer. She became alarmed, and rushed eagerly from tree to tree, still she could not find them. At length she thought she heard a moaning at the foot of the old tree, and she ran down as fast as possible, and there with a broken leg, and a spoilt tail,

sat one of her children crying and moaning.

"'Oh, dear, dear me! what's the matter?' said madam.

"Her son only groaned.

"'Where have you been? Where's your brother?' asked the mother.

"'We went to the filbert ground and the man shot us; brother is dead, and the man picked him up, and my leg is——. Oh, dear, how it pains me.'

"Poor madam was so shocked that she could not speak for some moments; but as soon as she recovered she assisted her wounded son up the tree to the house, and did all she could to alleviate his suffering.

"Later in the evening when the poor wounded young squirrel was asleep, madam was heard to say to a neighbouring squirrel, 'What a pity it is that young people will bring so much suffering and sorrow on themselves, because they will not attend to the advice of older and experienced people.'

"'Ah, yes!' replied her neighbour. "Disobeying the good advice of kind parents nearly always ends in sorrow.'

"'True, very true." said madam."

"Thank you, Aunt Lucy? Thank you, aunt," broke from all the children when she had finished; Nellie declaring, "It was one of her very best stories."

They then sang some of their favourite pieces together, and at nine o'clock the bell rang for prayers.

CHAPTER VIII.

A QUIET MORNING.

THE room occupied by Kate at the Dale was in the second story, and had been formerly the nursery. It was at the western end of the house, and had two windows in the old-fashioned, pointed gables, one looking westward, the other southward. The view from each was exceedingly beautiful, and all who knew the room agreed in pronouncing it the pleasantest room in the house. The outlook westward was limited, but very charming. Immediately before you lay the extensive garden, with its well-kept gravelled paths stretching away towards the great filbert ground which bounded its southern and western sides; beyond this, stretched mile on mile of the splendid Leyoak Park. The view southward was more varied and beauti-

ful still; just below was the trim lawn and richly fruited orchard, and looking over these, you saw the embattled walls of an armoury, and the fine old tower of Chesterton Church, its exquisite tracery and graceful pinnacles being easily discerned against the blue or grey background of sky. Farther still than the town of Chesterton, you could see the rich grounds of an ancient abbey, and these stretched away until lost in the bleak uplands of the Woldcot hills.

Kate was very fond of this room and spent many quiet hours there; it was very large, and during the severe weather, a fire was kept continually burning in it.

Against the window looking south stood an old-fashioned easy chair near a small round table, on which were placed an antique ink-stand and a few books. This chair was Kate's favourite seat, and almost every morning she might be found spending an hour in the quiet reading of a little purple-covered Bible with strong silver clasps. This Bible had been her mother's, and had been given by her to Kate when on her dying bed. Many kind and blessed counsels had been

given with the book, and though these had sunk into her young mind, it needed not their power to bind it to her heart. The book was dear to her for her dead mother's sake; she knew its pages had been well read by her through many years, and that its truths had been her comfort and strength when dying, and she loved it for the precious memories which clung around it. But she loved it for other reasons also; she valued it because it revealed the Saviour to her, and because she found in it help and guidance in her daily duties.

The morning after Aunt Lucy's arrival, Kate sat in the old chair by the window, with her little Bible open on her lap, but she was not reading; one hand rested on the elbow of the chair, and the other was lightly placed on the open book, whilst her face was turned towards the window. She seemed to be looking intently on the distant woods, and ancient tower, but in reality her thoughts were far away; the snowed landscape had no charm for her just then. So occupied was she with her own thoughts, that she did not hear the door softly opened by Edith, and

was not aware of her presence until the soft hand rested on her shoulder, and the pleasant voice said, "Katie, dear."

Kate turned her face towards the speaker, and smiled pleasantly, but Edith saw that tears were shining in her eyes.

"Whatever are you doing here so quietly?" said Edith.

"Oh, nothing very particular. I've only been thinking."

Kate was never forward to tell her thoughts to others, and it often needed close questioning to induce her to speak of them.

"Are you unhappy, Kate?"

"No, dear; not at all."

"I was afraid you were, you looked so sorrowful."

"Did I? Then I ought not to have done so, for I was feeling very happy indeed."

"Were you? Then what were you thinking about that made you look so sad?"

"I had been reading the 14th chapter of St. John's Gospel, and I thought how good it was of Jesus to go away to prepare a place in heaven for those who love Him, and to promise to come again to take them to that

home. I thought of dear mamma too, for she was very fond of this chapter."

"You were very sorry to lose her, were you not, Kate?"

"Yes, very, *very* sorry."

"But she was a good woman, was she not, Kate?"

"Oh, yes!" said Kate, smiling brightly through her tears.

"Then she is in heaven with Jesus, Kate."

"Yes; I am sure of that, because she loved Him so much on earth, and felt so certain about it before she died."

Kate took Edith's hand in hers, and turning her face towards the window, sat silently gazing out on the distant woods.

"Do you think, Kate, that Jesus always takes care of those who love Him?" said Edith, suddenly and earnestly.

"Yes; I am sure of it."

"Why are you sure, Kate?"

"Because the Bible says so."

"Where does it say that?"

Kate turned over the leaves of her little Bible, and found the 13th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and pointing to the

latter part of the 5th verse, told her cousin to read it.

She did so, first silently, then aloud, "*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*"

"Here is another text which proves it," said Kate, turning to the 8th verse of the same chapter, and reading it aloud, "*Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.*"

"Then you think Jesus Christ never changes?"

"Never, Edith, dear. He is always the same. Other friends change and die, but Jesus is the same for ever."

"And will He be the same friend to all who love Him?"

"Yes, dear; no matter how young or how old, or what they are, if they love Jesus, He will be the same friend to all."

"How nice it is that the Bible tells us all this, Kate."

"Yes, it seems to make one love the Bible so much, to know that it tells us of just the Friend we need."

Footsteps were heard coming along the

passage; there was a gentle tap at the door, and Aunt Lucy entered.

"Oh, are you here, Edith? I thought you were in the library."

"I was a little while ago, aunt; but I came up to seek Kate, and I stopped talking."

"Take this chair, auntie, dear," said Kate, rising from her seat, and gently pushing Miss Melville into it.

"Thank you, dear; but what will you do?"

"I will soon find a seat, auntie," said Kate. And she drew a footstool near to her aunt, and sat down upon it.

Miss Melville took up the little Bible which Kate had placed on the table, and looking at it, said, "Was not this your mamma's Bible, Kate?"

"Yes, aunt. Do you remember it, then?" said Kate, smiling brightly at the thought of her mother's Bible being so readily recognised.

"Indeed I do, my dear; I could not easily forget a book seen so often in your mamma's hands, or on her work-table."

"It was very dear to her, auntie."

"I know it was, and I hope it will be as precious to her child."

The tears stood in Kate's eyes as she said, "It is precious, auntie; there are so many things that make it dear to me."

"What are they, Kate?"

"I love it because it tells me about Jesus Christ, and points me to Him as my Saviour."

"Ah! that is the best of reasons for loving the Bible, Kate. If we feel we are sinners, and see that it reveals Jesus to us as willing and able to save us from our sins, then we shall indeed love it."

"I love it also, aunt, because it seems to be always fresh and beautiful; there seems so much meaning in it, that I don't get tired of it as I do of other books."

"I am so glad to hear you say this, and I hope you will always feel the Bible to be a precious book. It is indeed a book of beauties, every page seems filled with gems. I read the other day a description of a silver egg in the green room at Dresden, which nicely illustrates what we are speaking about.

'This silver egg was a present to one of the Saxon queens, and when you touch a spring, it opens and reveals a golden yolk. Within this is hidden a chicken, whose wings being pressed, also flies open, disclosing a golden crown, studded with jewels. Nor is this all, another secret spring being touched, hidden in the centre, is found a diamond ring.' The truths of the Bible are like this, there is treasure within treasure, beauty with beauty, always something to delight and help us."

"But everybody doesn't think of the Bible like that, aunt, do they?" said Edith.

"No, dear; only those who read it lovingly and patiently. Jesus Christ said, '*Search the Scriptures*,' and it is those who *search* them who know most of their beauty and power."

"But some bad men have admired the beauty of the Bible, haven't they, aunt?" said Kate.

"Yes, they have admired its literary beauties, they have liked it because of its grand poems, its terse proverbs, its beautiful parables and wonderful histories."

"But that would not help or comfort them much, auntie," said Kate.

"No, dear; it must be loved because it is God's word, and teaches us how we may be pardoned and grow like Jesus, if it is to be a helpful and blessed book to us. Never neglect it, my children; read it diligently and prayerfully every day, and you will find it '*a lamp unto your feet, and a light unto your path.*' It will always be an unfailing comforter and a sure guide."

Just then the first bell rang for dinner, and Aunt Lucy and the girls separated to prepare for it, Kate saying, as Miss Melville left the room, "I am so glad you came up, aunt, it has been such a nice, quiet morning."

Edith said nothing, but the tears in her eyes told how deeply the morning's talk had touched her heart.

CHAPTER IX.

TABLEAUX VIVANTS.

"A HAPPY New Year to you, aunt."

"Thank you, dear; I wish you the same."

The speakers were Mrs. Melville and Kate. They were the first members of the family to make their appearance in the breakfast-room on New Year's morning. Mrs. Melville stood near the fire, and returned the greeting of her niece by a happy smile and loving kiss.

"There seems to be something strange and solemn in beginning a New Year," said Kate.

"Yes, there is, my dear," said Mrs. Melville. "And yet there is cause for great gladness also. God has mercifully spared us through the past year, and we ought to feel thankful to Him for His goodness."

"I do feel very thankful, aunt; but it

seems like welcoming a new friend to welcome a New Year, and we don't know what it will bring us."

"True, dear; but we must not forget that it is God who sends us all the joys and sorrows which the year may bring. I have just been reading this verse, Kate, and I think it will make a suitable New Year's motto:—'*The Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory; no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.*'"

"That *is* a nice help, aunt."

"I have found it so, dear; we cannot trust God too much; the more we love and trust Him, the more do we find that He is a '*sun*' to give us brightness and joy, and a '*shield*' to protect us from harm."

"And all that He sends us *is* good, aunt."

Mrs. Melville turned, and looked lovingly into Kate's face, saying slowly and earnestly, "*We know that all things work together for good to them that love God.*"

In a few minutes the boys came trooping into the room, and then there were hearty greetings and loving embraces all round;

Aunt Lucy coming in for quite an extra share, because, as Nellie said, "she did not have any kisses from them on Christmas-day."

"Did any of you young people hear the New Year rung in?" said Mr. Melville, as they sat at breakfast.

"I think Kate did, papa," said Edith.

"Is that correct information?" said Mr. Melville.

"Yes, uncle," said Kate, blushing.

"Do you mean to say, Kate, that you sat up to hear the bells ring at twelve o'clock?" said George.

"Yes; why not, George?"

"Well, I'd rather be comfortable in bed," said he.

"I like to hear the bells ring in the New Year," said Kate. "It seems like a joyfully earnest welcome to one whom we hope will be a good friend to us. I always sit up in my room at Langdon till I hear the bells ring out from the old tower."

"I feel very much like it," said Mark. "I sat up last night until I heard the first peal ring out."

"*You* sat up!" said Charlie. "Why, I thought you got into bed directly."

"No; but you were not likely to know anything about it, for you and George were asleep almost as soon as your heads touched the pillow."

"I dreamt I heard them," said Nellie.

"Well, perhaps that was almost as pleasant," said Aunt Lucy, smiling.

"I think a great deal pleasanter," said Charlie, as he helped himself to toast.

It had been decided to have a large party of young people at the Dale on the following Wednesday, and after a long discussion between the elder members of the family, it had been arranged on the previous day that part of the entertainment should be tableaux vivants. Mr. Melville had promised to let them do as they pleased with the library, and Aunt Lucy had engaged to render all her assistance in the preparations.

As they sat at breakfast, Charlie, who sat next to Nellie, said to her, "We are to have some tableaux at the party, and we must arrange about them to-day."

"*What* are we to have?" said Nellie.

"Some tableaux vivants. Don't you know what they are?" said Charlie.

"No," said Nellie.

"Why, it means pictures, Nellie," said Charlie. "You dress people up like the figures in a picture, and then arrange them in the same way as they are in the real painting or engraving."

"Then the people must be quite still, mustn't they?" said Nellie.

"To be sure they must. It wouldn't be a tableau if they were not."

"Then, I don't think I should care to help, because I'm afraid I could not be still long enough," said she.

Everybody at the table laughed at Nellie's frank confession of restlessness.

After breakfast, the children and Aunt Lucy met in the library to decide upon the scenes which were to be represented. There were very many suggestions made by the young folks, but most of them impracticable. Charlie wanted two or three scenes in which at least two horses would be required.

"You know we cannot manage anything with horses," said Kate.

"Why not?" said Charlie. "There are two wooden horses somewhere in the house."

"Oh, we can't use them," said Edith, laughing. "The one has lost all its legs, and the other has no head."

"Oh, I can manage them. I'll soon mend them up with a few nails."

A hearty laugh greeted Charlie's promise to repair the horses.

"I think the best plan would be to look at some book of historical engravings, and select two or three pictures that are simple and easy of representation; it is useless to try very difficult ones," said Miss Melville.

"Hurra! that's just the thing," shouted George. "Where are some books?"

Mark soon placed two or three illustrated books before his aunt. She looked carefully through them, and at last pointed out two engravings which she thought would be both interesting and easy to represent.

"What are they, aunt?" said Mark.

"One is an incident from Spanish history, the interview of Columbus with Queen Isabella. The other is the signing of Magna Charta by King John."

The children looked eagerly at both engravings, and, after some demur, decided they would do very well.

"But the King of Spain is not in the group," said George.

"No," said Miss Melville. "It is a picture of the interview which Columbus obtained with Queen Isabella, by means of her confessor, after the conquest of Grenada, and in which he so convinced her of the correctness of his judgment, that she parted with many of her jewels to raise sufficient money to fit out three small vessels, in which Columbus and his associates made their successful voyage of discovery. You see he is standing by the table, on which is spread a map, by means of which he is pointing out to the Queen his proposed route."

"Mark would make the best Columbus," said Nellie.

"Then Kate must be Queen," said Charlie.

"There are only two attendant ladies," said Rupert. "Edith and Nellie can easily represent them."

"I shall be sure to laugh," said Nellie.

"I don't believe I could possibly stand behind the Queen's chair without doing so."

Aunt Lucy smiled and said, "You must try, Nellie."

Nellie only shook her head and laughed too.

"That old-fashioned carved chair in the hall will make a capital throne," said Mark.

"First-rate," said Charlie. "But what can I and George be in the picture?"

"You must be those grim-looking soldiers with swords," said Nellie, smiling mischievously.

"Then you must take care how you behave yourself behind her majesty's chair, or you may find yourself in some dungeon pretty quickly," said George.

"Ah, you can't do that, because it is a tableau, and you said the people must not move nor speak," said Nellie, laughing triumphantly.

"Then I must be the father confessor, I suppose," said Rupert.

"Yes; that will suit you very well," said George.

"What ugly head-dresses the attendant

ladies have," said Nellie. "Shall we have to wear things like those?"

"I suppose so," said Edith.

"I will make a crown," said Mark.

"And I and Kate and Edith will see to all the robes," said Aunt Lucy.

"I and George will make some famous wooden swords," said Charlie.

"Mind you don't cut yourselves with them," said Nellie; and she ran round the room laughing heartily, as Charlie pursued her, but in vain.

After further search, three more pictures were found, which were approved as suitable for tableaux, and these were thought quite sufficient.

"I think we had better arrange all the robes and various matters which will be required for the other tableaux, and then ask some of your young friends to assist in the representation," said Aunt Lucy.

"That will please them very much," said Edith. "Mark and I will ask some of them."

During the next few days they were all very busy at the Dale, both in preparing

dresses and trying the positions of the pictures. Old crimson curtains, white muslin, lace, silk dresses, and old furs, in the hands of Aunt Lucy and the girls, made quite an imposing array of ancient and modern robes; whilst white card-board and gilt paper, in the hands of Mark and Rupert transformed themselves into wonderful kingly crowns, lordly coronets, and priestly mitres. Nor were Charlie and George indolent; they were proving themselves quite equal to the occasion, and an astonishing display of wooden swords, halberts and daggers made their appearance from some room high up in the house, and which at once became dignified as Charlie's "*arsenal.*"

The guests began to arrive early at the Dale on Wednesday evening, and when Mr. Melville entered the drawing-room about six o'clock he found it well filled. There were many young people present, and the large old-fashioned room presented quite a gay appearance with its groups of well-dressed boys and girls. Around a table which was profusely covered with portfolios of choice engravings and costly illustrated books, stood the young

Hardings from the rectory, and three of the young Glossops, fine, manly, merry-looking lads. Opposite a pier glass, and regarding himself with great complacency, stood Herbert Johnson, a fine, handsome lad of fifteen, feeling all the dignity of being an Eton boy. A group of pretty girls sat round Aunt Lucy on a large ottoman near the fire; and, turning over some new music with Kate, stood Gerald Hall, a boy of twelve, who sang like a nightingale. In the recess formed by one of the bay windows stood a merry, chattering group of boys and girls, who were being informed by Charlie, "that no end of things" were expected of them in the way of help in the coming tableaux. On a low seat near the window, and almost hidden by the heavy folds of the curtains, sat little Florrie Sims, an orphan child of eight. Her parents had been friends of the Melvilles, and since their death she had lived with a maiden aunt near Chesterton; she was a little timid child, known to very few there, and shrank from the inquiring glances cast upon her by the young folks around. She was feeling lonely and sorrowful even in the crowded drawing-room,

and her dark eyes shone with repressed tears. Edith Melville, who was sitting with the group around her aunt, caught sight of the sorrowful little face, and jumping up, exclaimed, "Dear me, there's little Florrie Sims sitting all alone;" and, crossing the room, sat down by her. Edith soon engaged the attention of the child, and in a short time she was passing to and fro in the room, looking as happy as any of them. Edith's ministry of love had done its work, and made one little heart glad during the evening.

Amongst these merry young folks Mrs. Melville seemed thoroughly happy, as she softly moved about making all feel at home by her welcome smiles and loving words. She wore a dress of purple satin trimmed with white lace, and her white hair was banded smoothly beneath her lace cap. The purple dress seemed to be everywhere, and just where its wearer was most wanted.

Tea and coffee were soon handed round, and afterwards there was music and singing. Kate and Mark sang several duets, and Gerald Hall sang some of his sweetest songs. Then came the event of the evening,—the

tableaux vivants. The library had been arranged by Mark and Kate to suit the representations, and great was the interest and pleasure awakened by them. Then came other games and more music and songs; and before supper Mr. Melville conducted family worship in the drawing-room, earnestly asking God to guide all the dear young people there into His "ways of pleasantness and paths of peace."

As the merry groups sought for cloaks and wraps, the old clock in the hall struck eleven; and as they dispersed they all declared it to have been the "pleasantest of all the Sunberry Dale parties."

CHAPTER X.

THE SKATING PARTY.

THE Hadfields had been at the Dale nearly three weeks, and still the snow remained on the ground, frozen into a hard, crisp mass. The trees looked as though they were hung with jewels, and the icicles on the eaves of the house glistened like crystal pendants. The sparrows that chirped on the lime trees looked thin and listless, and the red-breast grew bold enough to sit on the window-sill until a supply of crumbs had satisfied his wants.

The great pond in Leyoak Park had been frozen over nearly a fortnight, and many persons had been skating upon it for the last two days. The boys at the Dale had begged very hard to be allowed to go on the ice on the Tuesday after the party, but Mrs.

Melville had been so opposed to it that all thought of it had been abandoned. On the Thursday the petition was renewed with greater vigour.

"It's quite safe, mamma," said Charlie.

"How do you know that?" said Mrs. Melville.

"The keeper told me yesterday it was safe," replied he.

"What do you say about it, Mark?" said his mother.

"Well, I think it is all right," said he. "The Hardings were on the ice almost all day yesterday."

"Are you sure they were there?" said Mrs. Melville.

"Yes, mamma. I met Alfred Harding last night in the town, and he told me they had all been during the day."

"Very well then," said she. "I suppose you had better go, only be sure and take care of yourselves; and be back by two o'clock."

A loud "hurra" and a somersault turned by Charlie, were sufficient proof of the pleasure the permission gave them.

There was a general rush after hats, caps, coats, and skates, and in less than ten minutes the whole group, with the exception of Kate, were eagerly walking towards the pond.

The fish-pond was a large piece of water covering many acres, and was pleasantly situated in a hollow near to one of the entrances to the park. Great beeches stood thickly clustered near the pond and stretched out their branches over the water, whilst sloping banks of green sward stretched down to the water's edge. The banks were now all covered with snow trodden into dirty, irregular paths, by the tramping of many feet. On the west side the pond was bounded by a wide gravelled walk, in the centre of which stood a picturesque thatched building called the "boat-house." This building was without doors or windows, and was simply a roof resting on ornamental pillars, with the side away from the water enclosed down to the ground. In this boat-house stood two or three old chairs and stools for the use of those who wished to put on skates.

The young people from the Dale soon

reached the pond, and although early, a large number of persons were already engaged in sliding or skating upon its frozen surface.

Mark was told by one of the keepers that the ice was quite safe except in one part near to the boat-house, where it had been broken by the keepers a day or two previously, to supply the swans with water, and was now frozen over again. Mark pointed out this dangerous place to his brother and cousins, and desired them to keep away from it.

Two hours passed pleasantly by; the boys were expert skaters, and they thoroughly entered into the pleasure and excitement of the sport. Edith and Nellie had crossed the pond twice under the escort of Mark, and were standing near the boat-house laughing at the awkwardness and frequent falls of those who were inexperienced in the use of skates.

The Chesterton church clock struck twelve, as Mark, meeting with one of the Glossops, stopped to ask him some questions about a Latin lesson. He had not been talking many minutes when, turning to look for his com-

panions, he saw George racing with another boy near the spot he had been told to avoid. Mark at once turned towards the place, shouting to George to return.

The two boys were skating very swiftly, and George, who was in advance of his companion, tried to stop suddenly. It was too late, the velocity of his pace brought him on the thin ice. There was a loud crash, a fearful scream, and George slipped through into the water. He rose again almost immediately, and as he came to the surface, he caught at the edge of the ice, and grasping it firmly, was able to hold his head above the water.

The skaters came from all parts of the pond at the sound of the crash, whilst Nellie and Edith stood on the shore with hands clasped convulsively and faces almost as white as the snow around them.

Mark immediately fastened a rope, which was lying near, around his waist, and telling the bystanders to hold it securely, crept softly towards his cousin, and kneeling as near as he could, stretched out his hand to him. George grasped it tightly and raised

"In a few minutes, he had gained a firm foot-hold, and they were drawn towards the shore."—*Page* 113.

himself out of the water on to the ice. It was a time of intense anxiety; the ice was so frail that large pieces broke off several times as George succeeded in putting his knee upon it. Mark held him fast, however, and in a few minutes he had gained a firm foot-hold, and they were drawn towards the shore, amidst the ringing cheers of the excited crowd.

The strain and the fright proved almost too much for both the boys; George fainted, and Mark seemed quite exhausted. As soon as they recovered a little, Rupert and Charlie threw off their skates and ran to the Dale for the carriage to convey them home.

Kate and Mrs. Melville were standing at the west window of Kate's room talking, when they caught sight of two lads running rapidly towards the house.

"Why, aunt, that boy without a cap is Rupert."

"Surely not, my dear," said Mrs. Melville, looking earnestly at them for a few moments.

"It is, aunt; and the other is Charlie."

"So it is, dear; but why should they be running in that way?"

"I don't know, aunt; I hope there is nothing the matter."

"I hope not, Kate. Let us go down into the hall and meet them."

In a few minutes the lads had rushed breathlessly into the hall, Charlie saying, "Don't be frightened, mamma; but we want the carriage for Mark and George."

"The carriage! what for, dear?" said Mrs. Melville.

"George fell through the ice, mamma, and Mark got him out," said Charlie, as well as hurry and excitement would allow him.

Kate clung to her aunt in terror.

"Don't be alarmed, aunt," said Rupert. "They are not drowned; only very exhausted."

Mrs. Melville breathed a sigh of relief, and at once gave orders for the carriage to go speedily to the pond, and for a fire to be lighted in the boys' room, and the beds to be made warm.

In less than an hour Mark and George were comfortable in bed; Mark explaining to his mother how it had occurred.

Many grateful tears fell that night at

family worship, as Mr. Melville thanked God for His preserving care and for His goodness in averting from them so great a sorrow.

Kate's little Bible lay open on the table as she entered her room at night, and looking down on its open page she saw these words:— "*The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil; He shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.*"

The words touched her heart and called forth her grateful feeling, and she went to sleep comforted by the loving promise.

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORY-BOX.

MARK soon recovered from his exhaustion, but George, on whom the fright had had great effect, was several days before he could leave his bed. He was, however, able to sit up in an easy chair in his room on Monday, but still felt very weak. He hoped to get down to the library on Wednesday evening.

Aunt Lucy suggested to the young people that it would be nice to prepare a "story-box" against the evening on which George would come down-stairs.

"*A story-box, aunt!*" said Nellie. "Whatever is that?"

"Why, some of us must try to write a little story by Wednesday, and then a box must be placed in the hall into which the writers can drop their stories, and then the box must be

opened by some person in the evening, who must read them aloud to us."

"That would be very nice," said Nellie. "But I can't help in that."

"Must the names of the writers be put to the stories?" asked Kate.

"No, certainly not," said Miss Melville. "There must be no name, and the person who reads them must not say who wrote them, even if he should know the handwriting."

All agreed it would be pleasant to spend an evening in this way, and early on Wednesday morning a deal box, with an opening like that in a letter-box, and labelled "*story-box*," was placed in the hall by Mark.

George mended rapidly, and was able to come down to tea on the Wednesday evening. Mr. Melville had promised to read the papers which should be found in the box, and in order that nobody should be able to see the writing but himself, Mark had placed a table with a reading lamp upon it, and an easy chair near it, on one side of the fireplace, and arranged seats for the auditors on the other side.

"Suppose there should be nothing in the box," said Mr. Melville, as Charlie put it on the table.

"Oh, but there is," said Charlie.

"How do you know that?" said Mr. Melville.

"Because there is something that rattles inside, papa," answered Charlie.

Aunt Lucy laughed heartily.

Mr. Melville unlocked the box, and took out four small packets of paper. "I think I had better read them in the order in which I took them out of the box," said he.

Great anxiety and attention were manifested by all the family, as Mr. Melville unfolded a very small packet and read—

"THE TWO SPIDERS.

"Two little spiders lived in a holly bush. Their mother had been killed by a little boy, and so they had to get their own living. They thought this very hard at first and grieved about it, but they soon left off grieving and set to work.

"One morning they began to weave two webs, but when they had nearly finished, a

large bird flying fast broke them both with its wing. They were very tired, but set to work again, and very soon had woven two more webs; but just as they were completed a kitten ran up the tree, and putting her feet through them spoilt them both. This was a great grief indeed to the spiders, for they were getting very hungry. The younger one said he should not try again, but his brother persuaded him to make another, and they commenced at once.

The spiders had almost completed their work again, when the little boy, who had killed their mother, came and broke their webs with a stick. The younger spider would not weave another web, and sat down on a branch grieved and angry.

"'Do try again,' said the elder one.

"'I won't,' answered the other.

"'But mother wished us always to persevere till we succeeded.'

"'I don't care. I shan't try again; it's no use.'

"'Well, I shall, for I'm hungry,' said his brother.

"The elder one began another web higher

up in the tree. He soon finished it, and this time it remained secure from injury. Before long a large fly was caught in it, and as the little spider saw it he said to himself, 'I 'm so glad I persevered. I see now it 's a good thing to try and try again till success is gained.'"

"That is nice," said Edith. "I wish I knew who wrote it."

"What a jolly brick that one spider was, wasn't he?" said Charlie.

"*A what*, my dear?" said Mrs. Melville, as soon as the boys had ceased laughing.

"A brick, mamma. It means a jolly good fellow," said Charlie.

"I hope you will not get into the habit of using such words, my boy; I do not think it is at all proper or gentlemanly to do so."

Mr. Melville had unrolled another paper, and was ready to read—

"THE YELLOW DAHLIA AND THE MIGNONETTE.

"Squire Thomson was very proud of his beautiful well-kept garden. He was very particular about its neatness, and liked to

see it as free from weeds as possible. He enjoyed the pleasure of others in looking at it, and sometimes when he saw faces pressed close to the great iron gate, eagerly trying to catch a glimpse of the beauty of the garden, he would send the gardener to invite them to come in and walk round it. This made him a favourite with the people generally, and they were accustomed to speak of him as 'the kind old squire.'

"In one of the borders of this garden there was planted a strong healthy young dahlia. This dahlia grew rapidly, and soon became so tall that it was obliged to be tied to a strong stick to keep it from being blown about and broken. As it grew above the other flowers which surrounded it, it became very proud and thought itself a most important plant. One bright morning it found a hard round substance at the end of one of its stems, and it began to wonder what it could be. Day by day this round ball grew until it expanded into a very handsome yellow flower; and then the pride of the dahlia became so great that it thought all other flowers inferior to itself.

"This yellow dahlia was turning itself about in the sunshine of a bright August morning, when, looking down near its feet, it espied a plain drab-coloured flower growing close to its stem. At the same time a sweet perfume was wafted up to the dahlia.

"'I wonder what that can be,' said the dahlia. 'Really, what impudence to grow so close to me, and hiding part of my stem too. I must ask what it is.' And looking down at the little plant it said scornfully, 'Who are you, pray?'

"'My name is mignonette.'

"'Oh, indeed. And what brought you down there just close against me?'

"'The gardener placed me here.'

"'I am surprised at him. It is quite an insult to me to place such an insignificant flower as you are so near to me.'

"'I know I am not handsome, but I have very good qualities. That sweet perfume you smelt just now was from me.'

"'Pray, don't talk to me about your sweet perfume, as though that was worth anything beside my splendid colour and handsome form. I am surprised you should mention it.'

"'Well, I have heard ladies say they would rather have me because of my sweet perfume than they would have showier flowers without it.'

"'What conceit, to be sure; as though anybody would prefer a paltry mignonette to a handsome dahlia. It is quite an insult for you to say so, and I shall not talk to you again. I will only thank you to keep as far from me as you can.'

"Just then two of the squire's daughters came along the path near to the dahlia. 'Oh,' said one, 'here's a beautiful spray of mignonette. I shall gather it for the vase in the drawing-room. I am so fond of its sweet perfume.'

"'So am I,' said her sister. 'I would far rather have it than this great showy dahlia without any scent at all.'

"'Oh, so would I,' replied the other. 'I don't care much for such large showy flowers.'

"The young ladies gathered each a sprig of mignonette and passed on.

"'There,' said a young fir who grew near. 'That serves you right, Mrs. Dahlia. I hope you will see now that people do choose

things for their good qualities, and not only for grandeur of appearance; and that they would rather have goodness than beauty. Now, take my advice. Don't look down on other flowers as beneath your notice because they are not dressed as gaily as yourself. Remember plain-looking flowers may be very sweet and pleasant.'

"The dahlia made no reply, only hung down its head with shame."

"That served Mrs. Dahlia jolly well right," said George. "That 's a capital story."

"The next story," said Mr. Melville, as he prepared to read, "is about—

"THE DAISY AND THE LARK.

"In a large meadow there grew a little daisy. One bright morning it opened its white petals and displayed its golden centre to all the neighbouring grass blades. The sunbeams kissed it and the gentle breeze playfully swayed it to and fro until it felt quite joyous and merry. After a day or two the daisy became very thirsty, and began to long for some rain-drops, but it could not see

any signs of their coming, and it began to droop and mourn.

"'Oh, dear; what shall I do? I'm so thirsty that I shall soon die if I can't get some rain-drops. I'm getting so weak that I can hardly hold up my head now.'

"In a thick tuft of grass, near to the daisy, a sky-lark was busy building its nest. Just as the daisy was lamenting its hard fate the lark rose up in the air and began to sing a sweet, glad song. When it had finished its song, it came down and stood just by the daisy, and hearing its mournful tones, it turned round and said, 'Why, neighbour daisy, what are you mourning about?'

"'The weather is so dry, and I am so thirsty. I want it to rain.'

"'Now, I think it's beautiful weather,' said the lark.

"'Ah, it's all very well for you, I daresay, because you can fly off and drink at the brook, but I am obliged to stop here and die of thirst.'

"'Oh, neighbour daisy, don't talk about dying. You must be patient. I daresay it will rain soon. It generally does rain in the

right time, I think; and if you only wait patiently it will come all right.'

"'I think I 've been patient long enough.'

"'Why, how long have you been so thirsty?'

"'Since yesterday morning.'

"'Oh, that 's not very long. You must be patient a little longer.'

"'Do you see any sign of rain, neighbour lark?'

"'No, I can't see any signs here. I 'll just fly up and look round.' And the lark poised its wings and flew up in the air singing its sweet song. In a short time it was standing by the daisy again.

"'Well, did you see any sign of rain, neighbour lark?'

"'I saw a little cloud coming this way that looked like a rain-cloud.'

"'Is that all? Oh, dear; I wish it would rain now.'

"'I think it will rain soon, and you must wait patiently till it comes. I am sure it will come in the right time. I am a great deal older than you, and I have always seen the rain and sunshine come in the right

time. But I must not talk any longer; I must go.' And the lark hopped off to its nest amongst the grass.

"'Ah,' said the daisy to itself, 'it's very fine to talk about waiting patiently for things to come at the right time when you want them now; but I don't believe it will rain till I am dead, and I'm sure that won't be the right time for me.'

"By this time the little cloud which the lark saw afar off had approached nearer, and was spreading itself over the fields where the daisy grew. In a little while the rain-drops began to fall, and then there was a heavy shower. When the first drop fell the daisy looked up in astonishment, and then, feeling another, it spread itself out to drink in as many as possible; and when the shower passed off the little daisy looked as fresh and bright as it could look.

"When the shower was over, the lark hopped along to see the daisy, and found her quite joyous.

"'There now, neighbour daisy, I was right. I told you it always rained at the right time, and it's no use to be impatient and fretful

because we can't get what we want just *when* we want it. We do no good, and only make ourselves unhappy.'

"The daisy looked rather ashamed, and hung down its head. The lark did not wait for an answer, but, spreading out its wings, soared into the air singing.

"The daisy looked up after it, and said to itself, 'Well, neighbour lark was right. I will try not to be impatient again.'"

"That is an excellent story," said Mrs. Melville. The lesson of patience it teaches is so useful and necessary."

"But it is a hard lesson to learn, aunt," said Kate.

"Yes, dear, it is; but He who gives us the cares or trials which call for patience will help us to be patient, if we ask Him."

"The next story," said Mr. Melville, as he unrolled the last packet, "is in verse."

"In poetry do you mean, uncle?" said Nellie.

"Yes."

"That will be good, then, I am sure," said Nellie, clapping her hands.

Mr. Melville then read—

"THE LITTLE SINGER.

"The wind was coldly blowing
Along the crowded street,
The sound of childish music
Rose o'er the trampling feet.

"A little girl stood singing
A sweet and plaintive air;
The lamp-light streaming o'er her
Revealed a face of care.

"She sang, with wondrous sweetness,
A tender, loving strain,
Of Christ, who died our souls to save
From misery and pain.

"For many nights together
The little child was heard,
Her tender song repeating,
Of Jesus and His Word.

"At length the little singer
No longer trod the street,
Where her voice was wont to make
Its music soft and sweet.

"In a cold and dreary attic,
On a cheerless little bed,
The little singer rested
Her weary, aching head.

"'O mother, dear, I'm weary;
For now poor father's dead,

Who will help you when I'm gone
To earn the daily bread?

"'In the cheerless street I sang,
Where pence to me were given;
Soon I'll reach the golden streets,
And sing my song in heaven.

"'O learn to love the Saviour,
And then, when you shall die,
You'll come to me, my mother,
In the home above the sky.'

"Quickly passed a few more hours,
And the child's wish was given;
She entered through the pearly gates,
And sang her song in heaven."

When Mr. Melville had finished, there were tears in nearly every eye; the little singer had affected every heart.

"Do tell us who wrote the stories, uncle," said Nellie, as she saw him put them away into his pocket. "I do want to know so very much."

"I must not do that, Nellie," replied he, laughing; "or else I shall not be allowed to read the contents of the 'story-box' another time."

CHAPTER XII.

AN ADVENTURE WITH JOCK.

THE next day was wild and bitterly cold, and the young people found it pleasanter to seek their enjoyment wholly in home engagements.

The short winter day was fast drawing to a close as Mark drew a chair near to the window of the library that he might have a better light for reading. He had been reading more than an hour with intense eagerness, and his eyes were full of the flashing light of excitement. He had not been seated long when Charlie came rushing into the room, followed by Rupert.

"Halloa, old boy, what are you doing here moping by yourself?" said Charlie.

"I am not moping. I'm thoroughly enjoying this book."

"What book is it?"

"Cowper's Task."

"And a regular *task* it is to read it, I should think," said Charlie.

"You are mistaken there," said Mark. "It is one of the greatest treats I ever had in the way of reading."

"Why, it's poetry, isn't it, Mark?"

"Yes; of course, it is."

"I don't care for poetry; I never read it. Do you, Rupert?" said Charlie.

"I used not to care for it," said Rupert, "but last year when I was ill I had a volume of poetry given to me, and that seemed to awaken a desire to know more about it. Since then I have read a great deal of poetry, and it has been a wonderful pleasure to me. The gift of that book was like opening the doors of a rich palace, and I went in to enjoy the treasures."

"Why, bless me, you are getting poetical yourself," said Charlie, laughing.

A crimson blush spread itself over Rupert's pale face.

"You like poetry, Mark, don't you?" said

Rupert, eagerly, not heeding Charlie's last remark.

"Yes, I do. Next to the Bible, I think I love good poetry better than anything else."

"Do you like Cowper, then?"

"Yes; he is my favourite poet."

"But wasn't he a miserable, cross old chap?" said Charlie.

"No," quickly responded Mark. "He was a greatly afflicted man, but that only makes one pity and admire him more, because he could write such glorious things in such circumstances."

"'Glorious,' you call it; well, I don't call poetry glorious. It's all about clouds, and storms, and sun-light, and a heap of moonshine mixed up with it."

"Nonsense, Charlie; you know better. Here's a nice piece now which I have just read without any moonshine in it; may I read it to you?"

"Yes; read on, old chap."

Mark read with good accent and considerable spirit the following lines from "The Winter Morning Walk:"—

"But there is yet a liberty, unsung
By poets, and by senators unpraised,
Which monarchs cannot grant, nor all the powers
Of earth and hell, confederate, take away:
A liberty, which persecution, fraud,
Oppression, prisons, have no power to bind;
Which whoso tastes can be enslaved no more.
'Tis liberty of heart derived from Heaven,
Bought with His blood, who gave it to mankind,
And sealed with the same token. It is held
By charter, and that charter sanction'd sure
By the unimpeachable and awful oath
And promise of a God. His other gifts
All bear the royal stamp, that speaks them His,
And are august; but this transcends them all."

"There, what do you think of that?" said he, enthusiastically, as he closed the book.

"It sounds grand enough, but I don't understand it," said Charlie carelessly; "and if I did, it would not do me much good, for I shan't want it in a lawyer's musty old office."

"Loving good poetry won't hinder you there, Charlie; it will do you more good than reading inferior things," said Rupert.

The boys were interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Melville, who asked for Mark.

"Yes, papa; here I am."

"Oh, you are in the recess; I could not see you when I came in. I want you to take this note to Mr. Fowler; see him, and wait for an answer."

"Shall I go now, papa, or after tea?"

"After tea will do, if you go as soon as you can."

The bell was already ringing for that meal, so they proceeded at once to the dining-room.

Mr. and Mrs. Fowler were intimate friends of the family at the Dale, and many pleasant hours were spent by the children at Croft House, the residence of the Fowlers. Croft House was situated on a steep bank, and was reached from the public road by a gravelled walk leading through the garden, and then by two or three flights of stone steps which led up the side of the bank into a wide lobby, out of which a door on the right hand opened into the hall of the house, and a door on the opposite side into an office connected with Mr. Fowler's business. The dining-room was situated at the back of the house; the drawing-room was over one of the offices, and looked on to the garden and stone steps.

In a yard at the rear of the house stood a

large comfortable-looking dog-kennel. This kennel was occupied by a new and favourite dog called "Jock." I don't know whether I can describe him to you. There was nothing at all attractive in his appearance; he was nearly as large as a Newfoundland dog, but was neither a Newfoundland nor a Retriever. His long legs made it an easy thing for him to rear himself up to the height of a tall man; whilst his dirty, shaggy black and white hair, fierce eyes, and deep growl made him an object of fear to all strangers. Jock was no favourite with the children of the house, though he allowed them sometimes to come near him and pat him; but he never manifested any desire for a romp or a run with them.

Mark Melville was unusually timid with dogs, especially with those he did not know well; but no thought of meeting Jock would enter his mind as he took his father's note, for the dog was kept in the yard, and his way did not pass through it. Mark did not know the dog, as he had only lately been brought to Croft House, but he had heard the dog's

name mentioned by Mr. Fowler two or three times.

When Mark reached Croft House it was almost dark, and only a faint light in the drawing-room threw its feeble rays on the garden paths. He was stepping quickly up the lower flight of steps, when a black and white object on the topmost step caught his eye. He at once knew it must be Jock, in some way freed from his chain, and a cold shiver ran through all his frame. It was useless to turn and run for the street, the dog would in two strides have been upon him; and to try to pass him was equally dangerous. He felt powerless, and could only turn and lean his back against a low wall which wound up on one side of the steps, whilst the dog came on towards him uttering his low, fierce growl. Mark readily remembered his name, and began coaxingly to say, "Jock; good fellow. Poor old Jock."

The dog evidently knew he was a stranger, but was puzzled at his calling him by name; he stood quietly examining Mark for a minute or two, and then, rearing himself on his hind

legs, put his paws on his shoulder and his nose against his face. As the dog's paws rested on his shoulder, Mark felt sick with fright and ready to faint. He spoke coaxing words to the dog, and once or twice moved his hand to pat his head; but every word and movement was answered only by a deep growl from Jock.

Mark's terror grew unspeakable; the cold drops of sweat fell from his brow, and his legs seemed unable to bear him up any longer. He glanced up at the windows and down towards the road, but no deliverer appeared. He shouted "Mr. Fowler" at the top of his voice, but it appeared unlikely he would be heard in the back of the house, where, judging from the faint light in the drawing-room, the family must be sitting. He repeated his cry again and again; but every repetition drew from Jock an increasingly savage growl. Mark felt he must sink beneath the weight of the dog, for Jock kept his paws on his shoulder the whole time, and his growls sounded terribly near to his throat.

Some minutes passed in this position of terror,—they seemed like hours to Mark,—

" Rearing himself on his hind legs, he put his paws on his shoulder, and his nose against his face."—*Page* 138.

when he heard a door open and a footstep in the lobby; he knew it was Mr. Fowler's step, and a blessed feeling of relief crept quickly over him.

"Oh, Mr. Fowler; please come here, Jock won't let me move."

Jock sprang down at the sound of his master's voice, and was led away to his kennel, growling angrily all the way.

When Mr Fowler returned to Mark he led him into the dining-room to Mrs. Fowler, where the whole scene was recounted to her; whilst the utmost concern was expressed for Mark's fright.

"What brought Jock loose to-night?" asked Mrs. Fowler of her husband.

"I cannot tell. I had not been near him, and no one had orders to loose him to-night. It is very strange indeed."

"Did you hear me call, Mr. Fowler?" said Mark.

"I thought I heard a voice, but was not sure. I happened to go up to the drawing-room for some purpose, and fancied I heard a cry, and I at once ran down."

"What a good thing that you went into

the drawing-room," said Mrs. Fowler; "for we should not have heard any cry here."

"It is indeed a most providential deliverance, and I am sure we ought to be most grateful to God for it."

"It is a wonder the dog did not hurt me," said Mark. "He seemed very savage."

"I suppose it was because you called him by name and remained still; if you had moved away or touched him, he would have seized you immediately."

When Mark's excitement had subsided, and he felt rested, Mr. Fowler accompanied him home. Again and again had Mark to relate his adventure with Jock, as they sat round the library fire at the Dale, the younger members of the family looking upon him as a hero, whilst the older ones expressed their thankfulness to God for his merciful escape.

When the bell rang for prayers, Charlie was mounted on a table in the kitchen, exciting the astonishment of the servants by a marvellously drawn account of his brother's adventure.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNDER THE ELMS.

MANY were the questions put to Mark the next morning about his adventure, for all were anxious to know how he had slept and how he felt. He looked paler than usual, but said he felt well, and had rested comfortably.

"That dreadful dog spoiled my night's rest," said Nellie, as they sat at breakfast.

"How could he do that, dear?" asked Mrs. Melville.

"I've done nothing but dream about him all night, mamma."

"Were your dreams pleasant?" asked Charlie.

"No, indeed. I thought Jock was chasing me round the library, and at last pushed me into a corner, and stood up and put his paws round my neck. I was so frightened."

"I don't wonder at that," said Mark; "for I know what the reality is."

Mr. and Mrs. Fowler had already sent to inquire after Mark's health, and during the day many visitors called with the same object, having heard the most exaggerated reports of Mark's adventure.

During the morning, as Rupert was passing through the hall, he saw Kate and Edith putting on their gloves and prepared for a walk.

"Where are you girls going this cold morning?"

"We are going to visit poor old May," said Edith.

"Are you going to carry that basket to her?" asked Rupert.

"Yes; there is some jelly and two or three other things in it for May," replied Edith.

"May I come with you?"

"Yes; if you like," replied Kate. "And you can carry the basket for us."

Rupert put on his warm coat and hat, and taking the basket from his cousin, the three set forth on their visit. Both Kate and Rupert were accustomed to visit the poor in

their father's parish; it was to them a "labour of love," and many pleasant hours were spent in helping their father in this way; whilst from the godly poor they learned many lessons of wisdom and patience.

May was an old nurse of the Melville family; she had been servant at the Dale when the present Mr. Melville was born, and it was her frequent boast that her hands were the first to wash and dress him when he was a baby. She had continued at the Dale until Charlie was grown a rough boy, and then only left because of her increasing weakness. Her real name was Mary, but the children having fondly given her "May" as a pet name, it had become her recognised title. The name suited her well, none could have suited her better. She was now nearly ninety years of age, but her cheerfulness never failed; her smile was as bright now as ever, and her words as kind and patient. Her old age seemed to possess all the joyousness of spring-time, and so she was well called May.

When May left the Dale, Mr. Melville had secured for her one of the Brook Alms-Houses, and had done all he could to render

her old age pleasant and free from care. Nearly every day some member of the Dale household called to see her; and if a day passed without it, poor old May felt it to be one of her dreariest and saddest days. She used to say "that the sunshine seemed to be gone out of the day if none of her old master's family called at her little cottage." She had been unusually infirm lately, and had been confined to her bed for some weeks. When Edith and her cousins reached the cottage, they found her propped up in bed, her kind, patient face leaning back on a soft pillow.

"Is that you, Miss Edith?"

"Yes, May; and I've brought cousins Kate and Rupert to see you. You remember them, don't you?"

"Remember 'em! to be sure I do. I mind their dear mother too, when she used to come to the Dale. Come your way, my dears, and let me kiss ye once more. I've kissed ye many a time when ye used to lie asleep in these old arms in the nursery at the old house."

Kate and Rupert drew near to May, and the tears shone in her smiling eyes as she

kissed them again and again, saying, "How like they were to their dead mother."

May had retained many of the words and forms of speech which were current in her early days, and on her lips they had a sweet and pleasant sound.

May asked after every member of the Dale household with minute care, and was interested in hearing the least particular about each; an account of Mark's adventure awakening all her interest and astonishment, and calling forth her warmest expressions of thankfulness for his escape.

"And now, Master Rupert, ye must read me a portion before ye go."

"Yes, May; what shall I read?"

"Amost anything in the book is nice, but I do feel the Psalms most comforting."

"Shall I read the twenty-third, May?"

"If ye please."

Rupert opened the well-worn Bible which stood always on a stand by May's bed, and read the twenty-third Psalm, May often interrupting him with some word of loving counsel or comment.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters."

"That's aye true, that is," said May. "He is a good shepherd, and cares for the old sheep and the little lambs; He never forgets one of 'em, He looks after a poor old sheep like me, full of sin and often wandering away, and gives me more comforts nor I can tell ye about; and He cares for the lambs like ye, and carries 'em in His arms. Ye'll mind that and always love Him."

Rupert continued his reading.

"He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

May again spoke.

"I'm getting very nigh to the 'valley of the shadow of death,' but I've got no fear, Jesus won't forsake me now. It's a many

years since I first gave my heart to Him, but He's had it all a long while now, and he'll never leave me. I'm a poor sinner altogether, and can't do any thing good, but 'the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses from all sin,' and I've got that blood to plead and Jesus to rest on; and that's why it's all so light, and I'm so happy. Ye must give the Lord Jesus your hearts, my bairns; ye can't do without a new heart and a right spirit. And don't ye forget 'the rod and the staff;' that's the word of God. Ye can't go far without that if ye would go safe and well; always love your Bible, children, it's a bonnie help, and aye a blessed comfort."

When May ceased speaking, Rupert read on.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

"My cup runneth over," said May, softly as to herself, and then aloud. "Ay, it's full to the brim and running over with blessings. Over full, and all blessings; and I don't de-

serve one. They won't fail either, and I shall dwell in the Lord's house at last for ever. I'm only waiting. I'm only a poor old sinner, waiting till the doors of the King's house be opened, and I'll go in and see all His beauty for ever. Ye'll be sure and come too, my bairns. Ye'll mind I said *that*, and give your hearts to Jesus while ye're young."

May seemed weary with the effort of talking, and the young people whose eyes were full of tears, bade her an affectionate farewell, and bent their steps towards home.

The next day May was much worse, and at mid-day Mr. Melville was summoned to her bedside, he did not leave her again; she lay unconscious for some hours, but just as the Chesterton Church bells chimed six, she looked lovingly up into his face and firmly pressed his hand, a bright smile spread itself over her countenance, she softly whispered "*the King in His beauty*," and passed away to see Him face to face.

There was great sorrow at the Dale over May's death, all the family grieving for her as for an old friend.

The next few days were damp and dreary,

for a thaw had set in on Friday night and was followed by a heavy rain on the Sunday. By Tuesday morning the sky had cleared; a strong wind had dried the roads and the clear shining of the wintry sun cast on everything a touch of cheerfulness.

They laid May to rest on that bright Tuesday in January, under the elms in Chesterton Churchyard, and near the burial-place of her old master and mistress.

As Mr. Melville stood near the open grave he was heard to pray this prayer, "*Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.*"

CHAPTER XIV.

DEPARTURES.

MAY'S death cast a shadow over the young people for a day or two, but after that they soon recovered some degree of their wonted cheerfulness, and the old house rang sometimes with merry shouts and laughter.

On the Saturday evening after tea, Aunt Lucy sat at a side table in the library finishing a beautiful illumination of a Scripture text; the bright lamp-light revealing a countenance engrossed in her pleasant task of laying on the bright gold and rich colours of her work.

A happy group they looked that night in the cosy, comfortable room. A bright fire threw its blazing light on ceiling and walls, and aided the light which fell from the lamps to reveal the deep red glow of the heavy

curtains which were drawn across the windows. It glanced on the backs of the well bound books which lined one side of the room, and made them shine out like the beaming faces of old friends. It flickered on everything and gave to it its own sparkling radiance.

Mr. Melville had been reading, but the chatter around had obliged him to put away his book. He crossed the room to his sister, and stood looking on her beautifully-finished work. In a few minutes he was joined by Mark and Rupert, then by George and Charlie and the girls, and Miss Melville found herself surrounded by a circle of admiring critics.

"For whom is that illumination intended?" asked her brother.

"If you will excuse me I would rather not say until I have finished it; then there will be no disappointment if its completion is prevented."

"Quite right, sister; quite right," said Mr. Melville, heartily.

"What are the words, uncle? I can't see," said Nellie.

"It is the tenth verse of the first chapter

of Proverbs, '*My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.*'"

"Thank you, uncle."

"I hope, my children, you will none of you ever forget those words," said Mr. Melville. "As you grow older you will find many who will seek your companionship whose influence would be hurtful to you."

"But we must have companions, mustn't we, uncle?" asked George.

"Yes, my lad; I should be sorry to see you grow up without companions; but choose the good and avoid the bad. Your companions will help you to be good, or they will hinder you from trying to be so; we are constantly influencing each other, we cannot help it. If you thrust your hand into the fire it will be burnt; so if you associate with evil companions you will be injured. If companions tempt you to do wrong, resist them; avoid them."

"But wouldn't they think one rude and ill-mannered?" asked Charlie.

"Never mind that, my boy. Politeness is a good thing, and I would have you cultivate it; but never let those who entice you

to evil succeed in their efforts because you wish to be polite to them. Give them a plain, honest, firm "No." Say "No" to all their enticements, and do not flinch from it."

"But they laugh at one so, and try to make one look ridiculous," said Rupert.

"Never heed that, boys. If companions tempt you to do wrong, and you refuse, they may ridicule you, perhaps, but if you are firm in your resistance, they will learn to respect you, and cease from enticing you. Whereas, if you yield, they will lose their respect for you, and feel they can easily lead you where they please. Choose good companions, those who love God and His truth, those who will help you to do what is right, and encourage you in striving to serve and please God. Do not forget these things, my children, and when any of you are tempted by evil companions or evil desires, think of your aunt's illumination, and what I have said to you about it. And now, suppose we have a game of 'Proverbs,' and then, by the time we have done, it will be supper-time."

Everybody agreed to the proposal. Mrs·

Melville put away her sewing, and Miss Melville her illumination, and all thoroughly entered into the recreation, and heartily enjoyed it.

The time for the departure of the Hadfields was now drawing nigh. Mr. Hadfield had written to say it would be impossible for him to come to the Dale for his children, so they must make up their minds to travel alone. This was a sore disappointment to them all, for it had been a source of expected pleasure that he would make his appearance amongst them before the Christmas holidays were quite over.

The following Tuesday was the day fixed for the departure. As it drew nigh, all the young people seemed to grow more sober and thoughtful; the day drew on like a cloud casting its shadow on the brightness of their path. The Melvilles were sorry to lose their cousins, and the Hadfields, though wishful to see their papa, were very grieved to leave the dear old Dale, and were pained to feel they must miss the kind words and loving attention of Mrs. Melville and Aunt Lucy.

The prospect outside was as dreary as it

could be when the Tuesday morning dawned. During the night, a heavy rain had set in, and it was still raining fast when they met at breakfast; the rain-drops pattered against the window, and dropped from the outstretching branches of the rose-trees which were trained around it.

"This is an uncomfortable morning for you to travel," said Mr. Melville.

"*Uncomfortable*, do you call it, papa?" said Charlie. "I should say it's *miserable*."

"I suppose you *must* go, Kate?" said Aunt Lucy.

"Yes, aunt; it would not do to disappoint papa, and I know he is very anxious to have us back again."

"I'm sure everybody is sorry you are going," said Charlie, dolefully. "There's the old sun-dial has been shedding tears all night, and the lime-trees must have wept a little pond full over it."

This reference to the rain-drops on the limes, and the sun-dial, caused a laugh all round the table.

By ten o'clock, the carriage was at the hall door, ready to convey them to the station.

The luggage had been sent on before, with the exception of two baskets, which George —who was now quite strong again—persisted in having under his own care.

"What have you in those baskets, George?" said Aunt Lucy, as she saw him standing with one in each hand.

"Oh, I've got four rabbits in this one," said he, holding up the basket in his right hand.

"And what is in the other one?"

"Two kittens, aunt."

"You are not going to take those with you?" said Mr. Melville, laughing.

"Yes, I am; they are a fine sort, and Nellie has promised to help me to take care of them."

"Good-bye" was soon said, and they took their places in the carriage.

"Come, Kate," said George, "we shall be late."

Kate stood speaking to Mrs. Melville.

"Good-bye, Katie dear, and amidst all your difficulties, remember this promise, '*They that trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever.*'"

A grateful glance shone out of the tearful eyes, as she kissed her aunt, and stepped into the carriage.

Mark and his father accompanied them to the station, and Mark's special care seemed to be to settle Kate comfortably for the journey. In a few minutes the train steamed out of the station, and the pleasant Christmas visit to Sunberry Dale was ended.

On Saturday morning, they heard at the Dale that the young travellers reached home safely about seven o'clock the same evening.

CHAPTER XV.

A SEQUEL.

THIS chapter must be a short one, for what I have to say will not take long to tell, and yet I feel I ought to say it, because I think my young readers will like to know something of the future life of the young people who were together during the happy Christmas time of which I have written.

That was some years ago, for I was strong and upright then, and now they not only tell me that my hair is growing gray, but they tell me also that my steps are getting feeble, and I stoop very much as I lean on my black walking cane.

The great elms in Chesterton Churchyard seem as fresh and beautiful as ever, but there are changes to be seen amongst the graves beneath their shadow. There are more stones there now than there were at that Christmas

time long ago; and next to old May's grave stands a plain cross of pure white marble, with this inscription on it,—

"Sacred to the memory of Edith Melville, aged 20. 'Fallen asleep in Christ.'"

Gentle, patient Edith; she never forgot May's dying charge to "give her heart to Jesus," she sought Him and loved Him, and at last died happy in her trust in Him.

There is another stone there, more recently erected than the one just mentioned, it bears the names of Mr. and Mrs. Melville, and we know they have gone to join old May and Edith in the Saviour's home. I sometimes go and sit on a tomb-stone near these, and look at the names I know so well, but my poor failing eyes can hardly make them out for the tears that will at times fill them.

Sunberry Dale is hardly altered at all, it looks as pleasant and well-kept as ever. Mark and Kate are now the Mr. and Mrs. Melville of the Dale, and another race of "young Melvilles" are filling the old house with mirth and sunshine. I sometimes find a seat in a certain bay-windowed library, and my neck, legs, and arms are seized by a

small army of little people, who want to hear tales about "Grandpa Melville and Aunt Edith," and I sit and tell them about the old days when I was a boy.

Rupert is a missionary in the interior of Africa, happy and successful in his work. Nellie is settled near her father, who still occupies the old Langdon Rectory. Charlie is a rising barrister in London, and George a prosperous merchant in India.

And Aunt Lucy? What can be told of her? You may see her sometimes in the drawing-room of Sunberry Dale still, very much altered in appearance, but still the same good, loving Aunt Lucy.

My story is finished; let me close it by repeating old May's comment,—"Ye must give the Lord Jesus your hearts, my bairns; ye can't do without a new heart and a right spirit. And don't ye forget the 'rod and the staff,' that's the word of God. Ye can't go far without that if ye would go safe and well; always love your Bible, children, it's a bonnie help, and aye a blessed comfort."

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